

The Downside Up by TightTights (Yamxz)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe, F/M, Gen, Jancy, POV Alternating, Plotty, Plotty with Pining/Romance, Present Tense, Science Fiction, Season 2 Theory, Slow Build, Thessalhydra instead of Mind Flayer, a vastly inferior Season 2, alternate season 2, because no Dad-Steve, occasional strong language, though personal headcanon abounds, trying to keep everyone in character

Language: English

Characters: Chester the dog, Dustin, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas, Mike Wheeler, Minor Characters, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Thessalhydra, Will Byers, minor orig/made up characters, more as story develops - Character

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

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Summary:

Nancy's life is returning to normal, but there is no such thing for Jonathan as he and his family deal with the lingering effects of the Upside Down. They join forces once again to solve the mysteries plaguing the Byers' household-- and the question of the attraction between them.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I began this fic originally as a "what if" for Season 2. But now with Season 2 having arrived in the here and now, I present this fic as an alternative story to the canon, if instead of the Mind Flayer, the Thessalhydra was the Big Bad.

But mostly, this is a Nancy/Jonathan-centered fic. I chose these two characters to A) narrow the scope a little bit, and B) I liked their relationship and the resolution (?) they had at the end of Season 1, but I'm dying to explore it more here. My intention is to try and have this be immersive, like you're 'watching' an episode. For as long as this fic goes, I hope I succeed!

Nancy's breath puffs out in large clouds as a crisp winter morning greets her outside Hawkins High. She shrinks in her shoulders and threads through the crush of students filing inside the school. Bag over her shoulder and notebooks resting in the crook of her elbow, the horde pours her through the bottleneck of double doors, bumping and jostling between arms and backpacks, and she winces when her scarf catches briefly on someone's shoulder.

It's the first day back at school after Christmas break. Last year, she dreaded coming back to the monotony that came with being trapped behind a desk for hours at a time. A lot changed since then, and within the span of a single week. The ordinary humdrum of class appeals to her now more than ever.

Yet at this chaotic moment, she wants to run back home. But when the mad rush is over in the next moment, an arm snakes around her shoulders.

"You okay?"

Steve, with his wild, brown mane, quirks a brow as he searches her

expression for a clue. She gives him a half-smile. "I'm fine."

"Good, since no one ever seems to have manners anymore," he says, throwing a sour glance back and over his shoulder. He releases her, offering his elbow to her.

The half-smile grows full as she puts her free hand around the bend in his arm. A blush burns in her cheeks as he then flashes her his broad, heart-stopping grin. She turns away, berating herself for still being so bashful when they had been going steady for almost two months now.

She is, however, dating only Steve now-- not Steve plus his spiteful friends. *Former* spiteful friends. Tommy and Carol, specifically. Without their pernicious influence, she got to know the real, unpackaged Steve. He no longer held back his abundance of attentiveness and warmth.

Yet it was a boon not without trade-off. Though he still enjoyed the fame and admiration of his class, his social circle diminished as a consequence. Ever since he severed ties with his other friends, he didn't spend his time with anyone else. He still maintained innumerable acquaintances and admirers, but somehow didn't connect with anyone else, except for her.

No, that was inaccurate. There was one other person he hung out with regularly. She wonders if Jonathan Byers made it in today, or if he was still in the process of healing his household. Her lip tugs to the side when she thinks about how difficult it must be, even with his brother, Will, returning to his healthy and dynamic self. The cursed memory of their shared nightmare would remain for a long time.

"Later," Steve says, pecking her on the temple and jarring her from her thoughts. He winks at her as he disentangled himself from her and ducked into his homeroom.

"Bye," she says, continuing on towards hers.

The crowds thin as students filter themselves into their respective classrooms to wait out the imminent morning bell. A few steps further, and a crop of shaggy brown hair catches her eye. Closer, and

a student blocking her view closes her locker and darts for class. Confirming her suspicions, she sees Jonathan, head down and engrossed with something in his locker. Yet whatever it is seems all but forgotten when he looks up from over his shoulder and pierces her with his gaze, like some ambushed creature paralyzed with a rush of adrenaline.

An odd yet familiar sensation rolls through her, just under her skin, as though iron bearings throughout her body hummed with a gentle magnetic energy whenever he was in proximity. She did not even have to see him to know he was nearby. That same, prickly feeling pulled her in his direction, as it did now.

She had these sensations since he dragged her out of the Upside Down, as though she absorbed a whisper of its dark power through the membranes that coated her body. Jonathan held her so tightly then, locking in their unworldly connection. Even as she washed the foul muck from her body back at home, the strength of his grasp around her lingered in her memory. That night, it was the only thing keeping her solid form when she wanted to sublime and disappear into dust.

His shoulders relax, and he shares in her deep, quiet stare, like that of a hawk. They're both hunters now, their instincts whetted during their stint as monster slayers. Her focus narrows, and attunes her senses to touch on every detail in her surroundings, just they did then. His hair is more unkempt than usual, and though he's alert to her approach, there's a slouch to his posture. Nonetheless, he his mouth twitches into a shallow smile.

"Hey," she says as she nears him.

"Hey," he parrots, turning back to his locker.

"You're going to be late," she teases.

"Don't worry about me."

It's then she notices the dark, puffy skin under his eyes.

She leans in. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

So he says, but his slumping posture and flat affect belie him. When he looks over to her again, the magnetic energy bristles in her ears. "You're gonna be late, too, if you stick around."

She pretends to think about his point, then shrugs. That earns her a bigger smile from him.

"What's that?" she asks, nodding her chin toward his locker.

"Just some pictures I took over break."

"With the camera?" she gasps, her eyes alight. "Can I see?"

"Haven't developed them yet," he says, holding up a black film canister. She deflates. "But it's great, Nancy. Thanks again."

"Will you be in the dark room later, then?" she asks.

He doesn't answer. He drops the canister into his book bag and slams the locker shut.

"Jonathan," she says, her light mood condensing into heavy annoyance.

"I'll see you later," he says as he leaves her behind in his wake.

"Promise?" she shouts.

"Promise!"

She tries to smile, but fails when she glances down at the scar on her hand. A souvenir from their ordeal, and the proof of kinship, sealed with a ritual as old as civilization. (She had been studying.)

Her arm tingles, and her palm hurts. There's a sensation of rivulets of hot blood draining from it. It's a phantom, but instinctively, she squeezes her fist shut tight. Blood was the only substance that resonated with the other side. Blood from the deer. Blood from her, from Jonathan. From Barb. Even El, who, according to Mike, lost blood whenever she manipulated their reality.

She fears her scar still calls to the other side.

She wonders if Jonathan knows it, too.

As the question finishes in her mind, the shrill clanging of first bell whips her forward, her worry over the preternatural replaced by a much more mundane urgency to get to class.

2. Chapter 2

“Byers.”

“Here.”

He lowers his arm, stifling a yawn as his teacher, Mr. Wright, continues on through the rolls. He digs his chin into his palm as his attention turns out the window, and outside the classroom. His eyelids hang heavy as he ponders the fact that they called the past two weeks a winter break. *Break from what?* In his life, there was really no such thing.

He regrets his terse treatment of Nancy that morning. It was really just a reversion to his comfortable self, like slipping on an old shoe, when he sought to repel any attempts at social contact. He knows he looks especially awful today, but his self-consciousness wasn't just about that. He knew if he lingered near her too long, if their eyes met for too long, that he'd end up pulling her into the ongoing fallout courtesy of the Upside Down, where the skirmishes of doubt and fear still wage in his household.

He'll remember the pure terror in her eyes when he pulled Nancy from that tree for as long as he lives. As much as her unflinching courage when she sliced into her palm, as he did. Both instances stole his breath away. Nevermind that someone so astonishing would ever give him the time of day, as dire as their circumstances were.

He rubs his hand over his face, his palm sliding back under his chin.

But his burdens were not her burdens. Nor were they Steve's, whose clever proddings he no doubt would parry later on at lunchtime. He smiles. He had to admit, Steve was actually an interesting guy, and not just pretending to be as he assumed before.

He was a good match for her, after all.

Mr. Wright checks off the last name on his list, and announces something. Jonathan thinks it was a page number as the students around him hurry to open their textbooks. But while mired in his

thoughts and chronic fatigue, he finds he doesn't give one shit about it, so he remains with his chin in hand.

"Byers."

He glances up to the front of the class, where his annoyed teacher has an open book in one hand, and his other closed in a fist against his hip.

"Yeah?" he says.

"Page 98, if you please."

"I forgot it," he says. The truth was he probably does have it in his bag, but can't be bothered to look.

"Then look on with someone else, and not out the window. I don't care if it's Diane Lane in a bikini out there."

The class giggles, while he growls his consent. He rotates to comply with the order, but no one around him offers their books. *Figures.*

Mr. Wright begins to drone on with his lesson, and his thoughts drift away again before long. So many of his classmates wore the dread of coming back to this academic rut that morning, and it shows now on their bored faces. The material bores him, too, but he savors the awful monotony. This was his break, not the days off preceding.

Here, at least, he did not have to think about whether unworldly creatures crawled about his home, and if they existed.

"Mom!"

He nearly trips over his own feet when his shoulder collides with the door and gives way. The full force of his mother's banshee-like wail hits him. It quakes through his spine, and he shivers before fumbling for the light. The moonlight strikes her pale face and wide eyes, fixated upwards to the ceiling, and she is shaking her head to an fro. Finally, his shaky finger hooks around the lamp switch and twists, and its bright orange glow floods the room.

His mother's cries dwindle rapidly, her petrified stare contorting into a

panicked confusion.

“Where is it?” she says.

Jonathan follows her gaze to the ceiling, and finds it bare.

“Where’s what, Mom?”

“It was there!”

“What?”

“Some dark, black, ugly thing. I swear to God, Jonathan!”

He sits down on the bed next to her. The sheets are cold with sweat. “It’s alright, Mom. Calm down.”

“Where’s Will?”

“Will’s fine.”

“Did you check on him?”

He knows his expression conveys a ‘no’. “Wasn’t foremost in my mind when I thought you were being murdered in your bed.”

“Sorry. Sorry,” she whispers.

The door hinges creak, and speak of the devil, Will appears in the doorway.

“Mom?” he asks, timid.

“Oh, sweetie!” she breathes, jumping up from the bed. She glides over to Will and wraps her arms around him. “Are you okay?”

“Really?” he says, in a way that makes Jonathan smile.

“I’m so sorry, dear.” She pulls back to study Will’s face.

“Stop,” Will protests.

“Are you feeling okay?”

"I'm fine. Geez, Mom." He twists out from her grasp

"I'm taking you for a check-up," she declares, standing.

"No!" Will says.

"Mom, he doesn't need anymore check-ups," Jonathan insists. "They keep saying nothing's wrong, even though they're more than happy to keep taking our money."

"We'll go see someone else," she says, falling back onto the bed.

Jonathan takes a deep breath. "Listen, Mom. You went through a lifetime of stress in a single week. You're having nightmares. We all are. After what we've seen, it's normal to see shadows as monsters."

In truth, he sometimes jumped at the shadows, for a split second believing the Demogorgon still stalked them. But every time, it was his mind playing tricks.

"This wasn't just a shadow, Jonathan. This was something real, right there. It was from the other side, I know it!"

He sighs, glancing over to Will. He reels in horror when suddenly, all manner of black worms pour from the his brother's mouth, ears, and nostrils.

He gasps awake.

A mortified pall descends over his classmates, who turn their attention to him. Some, however, smirk and stifle fits of laughter.

*"Byers," the teacher sighs. "In case you forgot, sleeping in my class gets you extra homework. You will answer *all* the questions on page 100 instead of the first two."*

He nods, wiping the crumbles from his eyes. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Mr. Wright regards him for a moment, his brow converging with pity. He says, "In light of your circumstances, however, I'll make it only questions one through three. Get some sleep tonight instead."

“Yes, sir.”

Mercifully, the attention flies off of him when a heavy knock comes to the door. The teacher opens it to reveal one of the school administrators, an older, stout woman with pointy glasses-- Mrs. Sharpe.

“Byers,” she calls. He perks up, and raises his hand. When she sees him, she beckons and says, “Come with me.”

Low chatter erupts around him. Dread grips him as he stands and hoists his book bag over his shoulders, ignoring the stares as he rounds the desks towards the door. He overtakes the administrator toward the front office door, even as she scolds his undue haste with a pointed look. He doesn’t care. He knows in his soul that it’s his mother, and it’s about Will.

“My office,” she tells him when she shuts the main office door behind them. She points to an open door down the narrow hallway. He needs no further instruction as he dashes in, tosses his book bag aside and reaches for the receiver laying face down on the desk.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hi, honey.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Honey, I need you to take Will to the doctor today. Don’t worry, I spoke with them, and they agreed to let you go for the afternoon.”

“We talked about this. He’s healthy, and he hates going.”

“But I saw it again last night, Jonathan. This time, in the sink. I swear to you. But when I turned on the light, and it was gone. But no matter what, I need to know that Will is still okay.”

Jonathan pauses. Ever since her intuition and faith proved true, and helped lead them to Will, he hesitated to dismiss his mother out of hand. Yet psychological stress also had a funny way of manifesting, he knew.

So he says, “Mom, you know they don’t like me missing school. Can’t Hopper help us out?”

“I don’t want him to know.” She adds meekly, “I’ve worried that man enough for a lifetime.”

“So you’ll worry me instead.”

He hears his mother sigh on the other end, and his urge is to apologize. She then says, “I know you don’t believe me, but after all we went through, I just have to be sure one hundred percent that we’re out of the woods, you know?”

“I know, Mom.” He relents. “I’ll pick him up at lunch. When’s the appointment?”

“At two. Thank you, honey. I’ll be off work and back home by five to make supper, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.”

The receiver slowly slips from his fingers as he replaces it on its cradle. His limbs are like stone as he hoists himself up to stand and replace the book bag around his shoulder.

“All finished?” Mrs. Sharpe asks, hovering just outside the door.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

As he makes his way back to class, he pauses at a bench. After confirming the hallway deserted, he places his bag down, unzips it, and extracts the film canister. All photos of the ceiling and walls of his mother’s bedroom. He neither wants to be right, nor wrong. He never wanted to see another monster from the Upside Down ever again, yet he grinds his teeth, desperate for any clue, any residual that proved him wrong-- not a blank ceiling, bare walls, and empty floors that reveal nothing except doubt about his mother. That he wasn’t losing her.

“Jonathan Byers!”

He jumps and the cannister almost flies from his hand. His attention snaps to Mrs. Sharpe down the hallway, whose searing look could peel the paint off of the walls.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demands, her voice booming along the cavernous hall.

“Nothing.” In one smooth motion, he drops the canister back into his bag and pulls out a textbook, the same one Mr. Wright demanded of him before.

“Then quit dawdling and get back to class. *Now.*”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She huffs, shaking her head as she disappears back into the front office. He takes the opportunity to dog ear page 100.

3. Chapter 3

When the lunch bell rings, Nancy darts from her desk. Before long she is joined by a throng of fellow classmates pouring out into the halls. She swims against the roiling bodies towards his locker, hoping to catch him again.

Not Steve, but Jonathan, whose peculiar behavior earlier occupied her thoughts all morning. She worried, perhaps more than what was appropriate, but she feared that while her life may have gone back to relative normalcy, that did not mean that his everyday life resumed with the same predictability. *He didn't deserve to keep suffering while everyone else moved on.*

She attunes her senses again, her eyes darting to every crop of brown undulating before her. Her ears try to distinguish his voice among the bedlam. Though with this many people, she anticipates sensing his proximity before laying eyes on him.

Yet it never comes. Even as she exits the river and stands crammed against his locker, she feels nothing. Not the slightest jolt.

"Nancy," she hears.

"Hey, Steve," she says, turning to see him tear himself away from the crowd.

"Waiting for Jonathan?"

"Something's wrong."

"More than usual?" Steve replies.

Her brow twitches. "That's not funny. You know what I mean."

He throws his hands up. "Alright, alright, don't worry, I believe you. We'll check on him at lunch. Come on."

She hesitates for a moment, but Steve gives her a pleading look. "Okay," she says, nodding.

In a manner of charm only Steve could pull off, he had persuaded Jonathan to make a habit of joining them for lunch. She liked seeing the latter relax for once in the presence of others, and enjoyed it even more when he opened up about himself. About photography, about his interest in going to NYU, about his job. It was as though they plucked Robinson Crusoe himself off from his Island of Despair, and he was now remembering the joys of human society. Add Steve's passing familiarity with the punk rock scene, and their camaraderie was all but sealed.

With grim amusement, she realize that sometimes, *she* felt like the third wheel. On those days, she missed Barb deeply.

They go to fetch their lunch trays in the cafeteria, and wade through the noisy crowds to find their usual table. Nancy stands on her toes, periscoping over everyone as best she can, frowning all the while. When they approach their table, Jonathan is still nowhere in sight. The seats are bare.

"Now I'm starting to worry," Steve says, setting his tray down.

She performs one final scan around the cafeteria before settling down into her seat. "Maybe he just got held up," she says with false optimism. A sigh escapes her. Armed with a spork, she picks and prods the peas on her plate.

Her eyes widen, however, when she suddenly feels the strange pull at her back. Nonetheless, she jumps when Steve yells, "Hey!"

She knows Steve is waving to Jonathan before she spins around, smiling as the latter approaches at a brisk pace. "Jonathan," she says. But her relief is short-lived when she notices he does not have a tray, rather his coat is on snug and his backpack is slung over his shoulder.

Steve asks the question on her mind. "Aren't you going to sit?"

"Sorry," Jonathan says, coming to a stop next to her. "Just dropping by to say I've got to head home. Mom needs some help."

"Is Will okay?" bursts from her lips.

A pause. Jonathan glances at her briefly. "I'm sorry. I'll join you guys

tomorrow, okay?" He turns to leave.

"Hey," Steve calls. "Come on. We're worried about you. Especially Nancy."

He gives her a tortured look. "I know. I'll see you tomorrow." Jonathan dismisses them, bolting from the table before either of them could say another word.

"Just when I thought we were making some progress with that antisocial butthead," Steve says.

She doesn't respond until she sees Jonathan fully disappear from sight. "I think something's really wrong."

"He looks exhausted," he says. "And that's not hard to believe."

She turns back to Steve, her eyes dropping back down to her plate. "That's true. But what should we do?"

Steve shrugs. "Don't know if there's much we can do. He's been through a lot."

"So have we."

"Yeah. But not like him."

"That's not true. At least he got his little brother back."

"We're not like him," Steve insists.

She winces at his words. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not insulting him. I think he's a genuine badass. We don't carry stuff on our shoulders like he does. I don't think I have it in me to do what he does everyday."

"I'm sure you would find it. That strength," she says.

He regards her, his expression unreadable. He then says, "Thanks. But I'd rather not. Not for a long while. That's why we're different."

"Speak for yourself," she says. Her eyes fall again to the scar on her

hand. Steve notices.

“Okay, okay. You’re a badass, too. Happy?”

“Somewhat.”

Steve’s face falls. "Tell you what," he says. "I'll check on him this weekend."

She perks up. "You will?"

He shrugs, shoveling a spoonful of corn into his mouth. "Yeah. No big deal. I want to see that camera you bought him. The floor model was cool enough, but I'd like to see how it works with someone who knows what he's doing."

She throws him a side eye, saying, "Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to keep the blinds shut this weekend."

Steve swallows hard, so that laughter can burst from his throat. "Nancy Wheeler," he says, dragging her name out. When his chuckles die down, "Wish Jonathan could have heard that."

She blushes. "I was kidding."

"I know." He chews on some more vegetables, grinning. But as her eyes rove over her portion of lunch meat and reheated vegetables, she decides she's not hungry.

4. Chapter 4

The first Christmas he remembers vividly, he was seven years old, and his dad gave him his first cassette recorder. Once Lonnie showed him how to use it, to capture his voice and music, the magic of such a device made him delirious with wonder. He often wondered if his family might have been better off if not for his subsequent demand for blank cassettes, which his mother then supplied after his father left. He could remember that Christmas, too. He could remember her quivering smile when she said: *Do what you love, Jonathan.*

Now, as a teenager, he hates how his miserable, self-serving screw up of a father managed to give him a gift that changed his life. He hates how, for such a long time, he remembered that Christmas with Lonnie as the best he ever had.

But since his brother returned alive from the Upside Down, that changed. Though it came at the price of a harrowing week, one he hopes to never repeat, the sense of love and mirth - that memory of being whole - hit him as though he were seven-years-old once more. He wanted it to last forever, for every dinner thereafter.

Or at least past the New Year. Instead, since then, the joyous mood seemed to peter out in half-lives as dreary routine set in, and a mild, silent melancholy returned, reminiscent of the time before Will went missing. He should have known better. In the Byers' household, a vague insecurity would eventually seep into everything, expand and contract, fracturing the veneer of peace as ice does to asphalt.

At least he still has his fond memory. He calls upon on it that evening, where the only signs of life at dinnertime were chewing and the clinking of dishware. Jonathan sips a glass of water, then pokes at his serving of salisbury steak. He next moves to line the tips of his fork with instant mashed potato. He brings it to his mouth and touches his tongue to it.

“Jonathan.”

The uneasy silence retreats. He glances over to his mother.

“Eat your supper,” Joyce says. “Will is halfway through his already, so I know it turned out fine.”

Will shoots him a look as he forks another chunk of gravy-coated meat into his mouth.

“I am,” Jonathan says. He slices off a piece with the edge of his fork and mimics his brother. He wishes he could say it was the taste limiting his appetite. He waits for his mother’s inevitable question.

“So how’d it go today?”

Finishing his bite, Jonathan says, “With Will?” He nods to his brother. “In and out, about 15 minutes. Including the wait. Clean bill of health. Then I took us both back to school since there was nothing else to do.”

Will swallows his bite, adding, “I told you.”

Joyce tenses, saying, “Jonathan, please. I know you didn’t want to do it, but I appreciate it. Now I know we need to find a new doctor.”

“Mom!” The fork in Jonathan’s hand clinks against his plate. “Let it go, already!”

“I hate the doctor,” William mumbles, his interest in his meal waning rapidly. “I don’t want to go anymore.”

“I know, honey, but we’re concerned about you,” Joyce says.

“You are concerned over nothing,” Jonathan says. “After today, I’m not taking him anymore. Not until I see for myself exactly what you keep talking about.”

“Thank you,” Will sighs.

Joyce huffs, her eyes darting between her two sons, performing a hasty mental calculus. She pops a morsel into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully. After finishing her bite, she says, “Alright. No more doctor for now. But Jonathan, sweetie, I’m going to need your help.”

“What’s that?” Jonathan says.

“We’re going to search the house. I’m going to find one of these bastards and prove it.”

He fidgets, trying not make his overwhelming skepticism too obvious. “And if we don’t find any?”

Joyce takes a measured breath, tapping her fingers on the table. She shakes her head, saying, “Then,” she hesitates. “Then I’ll go find a shrink.” She chuckles at the end of her sentence. Despite himself, her admission moves Jonathan, and he reaches out for her hand. He looks over to Will, who has gone eerily silent. Yet he seems engrossed in arranging his string beans.

“Okay,” Jonathan says, patting his mother’s hand. “That’s fair. Once we finish up dinner, I’ll start looking.”

“Really?” she says.

“Yeah. If it’ll make you feel better.”

His mother pulls her chin in, as though on the verge of tears. “Jonathan, I’m so sorry for all of this. I’m really not trying to drive you and Will crazy. You’ve become such a fine young man. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” he says, going back to his meal. He scoops a bean into his mouth.

“Do you keep up with the Wheelers’ daughter anymore?”

He just about gags on said bean as he hears the question, but after pushing it down the correct pipe, he says, “Yeah. I hang out with her and Steve sometimes.” He reaches for his glass of water.

“Oh, that’s right,” she says. “Well, tell her hello for me.”

After gulping down the cool liquid, he says, “Will do.”

He starts when a fit of coughing erupts from Will’s side of the table. When it subsides, his little brother says, “May I be excused?”

Joyce cranes to inspect his plate. “Alright. If you’re sure you’ve had

enough.”

Over his shoulder, Jonathan keeps a sharp eye on him as Will dismounts from his chair and swiftly makes his way down the hall. The door shuts and there is a faint running of water.

“You said you saw one in the sink?” Jonathan says, his brow furrowing.

Joyce looks over to him, her eyes wide. “Why?”

A vague dread settles in Jonathan’s stomach, eliminating his appetite completely. “Just figuring out where to start,” he says.

“Well, there was the one in my bedroom the other night, too,” she reminds him.

He nods. He already documented the scene, but hesitates to let on lest it feed into her fears. He hopes it truly is just his mother’s imagination bringing strange creatures back into their home. He spears another chunk of ground meat and swirls it around in a dab of gravy. He forces himself to nibble on the edge, but his stomach lurches in protest. He sets down his fork in surrender.

“I’m sorry, Mom. It’s good. I’m just not that hungry.”

“I’ll wrap it up for you,” she suggests. He nods, and lets her remove his plate. He, in turn, picks up hers and Will’s and brings it to the kitchen for disposal. Silence returns, save for the clattering plates and running sink.

As Joyce places Jonathan’s plate in the fridge, their attention is soon captured by a vigorous thump-thumping as Will comes rushing around the corner.

“No running,” Joyce admonishes.

Will holds up his walkie-talkie. “Can I go over to Mike’s?”

“It’s a school night,” Joyce says, closing the refrigerator door.

“Yeah, but it was the first day back. We didn’t get any homework.”

“Really?” Joyce says, incredulous.

“Really!”

Joyce looks over to Jonathan and says, “As long as your brother doesn’t mind taking you over. And bringing you back by nine o’clock, sharp.”

Will’s big, pleading eyes pierce right through any objection Jonathan could muster. He smiles and says, “Grab a coat and what you need. I’ll finish cleaning up and grab the keys.”

Will’s expression alights with glee as he sprints back to his bedroom.

When Jonathan resumes wiping off plates and glasses, Joyce stops him. “I’ll finish cleaning up. You two go on ahead. Sooner you drop him off, the sooner you can get back here to help me.”

“Right,” he says, handing her the plate in his hand.

It’s a familiar route as he winds through the maze of knots and twists of inner suburbia. Despite Will bristling with excitement, the ride is quiet. Jonathan doesn’t mind as his thoughts wander wherever they please, jogged by pieces and chords of whatever song he can distinguish from the crackling radio. After he pulls the steering wheel into a gentle left turn, and they glide down yet another identical strip of neighborhood, Jonathan chances a look over to his brother.

He brakes when he sees Will staring off, his jaw hanging open, and with a ghastly pallor on his cheeks.

“Will!” he says.

Will’s color returns with an unnatural swiftness when he looks over to Jonathan, like blood returning to a depressed nail. “Yeah?” he

asks. "Are we there?"

Mouth agape, Jonathan asks, "Oh my God, Will! Are you okay?"

Will furrows his brow, confused as though his older brother sprouted a second head. "Yeah?"

Jonathan swallows with difficulty. "Maybe we should go home."

Will scoffs, slumping back into his seat. "Not you, too."

"You should go home and lie down if you don't feel good."

"I'm fine! I thought you were on my side!"

Jonathan turns back to the road, easing off the brake and gripping the steering wheel tightly. "I am, but you looked like you were about to puke just now."

"I feel fine," Will insists. "Come on."

"Okay, okay," Jonathan starts, struggling to settle his racing heart. "I believe you. But if that changes, if you feel even the slightest thing wrong, just call us and I'll be right over."

"Seriously, you sound just like Mom."

"Whatever."

Jonathan slows and pulls off onto the curb bordering the Wheelers' yard. The car is not parked for one second before Will opens the door and bolts for the Wheelers' front door. Jonathan grunts, extracting himself from the car to follow.

"Will! Wait up!" he calls, but in vain. Will raps his knuckles against the door, and the door opens by the time Jonathan catches up. An arm snakes out, probably Mike's, and its owner pulls Will inside without so much as a 'hello' to his chauffeur, but Jonathan smiles as catches a glimpse of the boys dashing off towards the basement. His smile fades when he shivers, and at that moment he spots a figure at the top of the steps just inside.

Nancy. *How long had she been waiting there?*

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” he replies, swallowing the lump forming in his throat.

Before he can react, she is flying down the steps towards him. His instinct is to back away, but it’s too late. Her spell is upon him, her mere presence dulling the otherwise sharp, nagging voice of his rational mind telling him to make it quick. That he doesn’t belong here. It’s a phenomenon he has grown used to when they are alone together.

“Come in,” she says. It almost sounds like a demand.

He hesitates, wanting nothing more than to step in out of the cold, but stops himself. He says, “I can’t tonight.”

“Don’t run away this time.”

When she set her sights on something, she did not back down easily, a trait that endeared her to him as much as it did terrify him. She punctuates her statement with open arms in a gesture for him to spill.

“Later, I promise,” he says, turning away from the door. “I’ve got to go help my mom with something.”

“That’s what you said before,” she says, chasing him out into the cold night.

“Stop, Nancy. It’s freezing.”

She goes on as if she did not hear him. “What’s going on? I’m getting really worried about you.”

Something tugs in his mind, tempting him to tell her exactly what was going on, to keep her there, shivering for hours as he enumerated every detail of his screwed up life. That same something tells him that she would stand there for hours willingly, if necessary. It’s on the tip of his tongue, but when she contracts and shudders with cold, he opts instead to shrug off his coat and offer it to her.

She takes it and slips it on, but in the next moment, she stuns him when she blows past and heads towards his car. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"Let's go," she says. "I'll help you with whatever you need to do. Then you can tell me what's wrong."

"Nancy," he says. "It's a school night."

She glares at him over her shoulder. Retreating from that point of attack, he quickly recoups and tries again. "What about your mom?"

A long sigh leaves Nancy's throat. She then says, "Stay right there. If you go anywhere, I'll kill you tomorrow."

He has little else to say except, "Yes, ma'am," knowing very well that she could follow through on a threat like that. Nancy bolts from his car and back inside her house. Surely, her mother would balk at the gall of her daughter's request to go joyriding at this hour, with a boy, and on a school night. He fishes his car keys from his pocket and moves to the driver's side. He sticks them in the ignition and fires up the engine to bask in the weak stream of heat flowing from its crusty vents.

How could he even explain?

His fingers graze along the shift stick. He wants to leave. He thinks he should leave. His rational mind reclaims its vigor and whispers, there's no point in needlessly complicating Nancy's life. He shifts the car into drive, but doesn't release the brake.

He jumps when he hears a knock at the passenger window. Nancy waves at him, and his reason fogs over once more. He almost forgets to readjust the gear back into park before reaching across to open the passenger side. Nancy's got her own coat on now, carrying his under her arm.

She plops into the passenger seat, smiling. As she hands him back his coat, she says, "As I said, let's go."

He takes it from her, but he is not convinced. "Your mom-,"

“She’s fine with it.”

“Did you actually talk to her?”

“Jonathan,” she fires back.

“I’m just saying, I don’t want my mom to get an angry phone call from Ms. Wheeler. She’s got enough on her mind.”

Nancy’s lip twitches at that admission, and he silently berates himself for the slip. She says, “I have her blessing. I promise.”

Her chin bobs in a way that underscores her sincerity. Her eyes are full, glassy. His objections fall silent. The walls come tumbling down.

“Alright.” He shifts into drive, and eases them off the curb. “But do you mind if I stop for something to eat? I’m starving.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I researched as best as I can, and I don't *think I'm being anachronistic with the tape recorder, but I am open to correction*

5. Chapter 5

Nancy finds her mother in the kitchen. The latter is running a dish cloth over a freshly-rinsed pan.

“Mom.”

“Yes, sweetie?” When her mother turns, her brow knits. “Whose coat is that?”

“Jonathan’s here. Do you mind if I go hang out with him for a little while? We’ll be back soon.”

Her mother quirks her brow in a knowing look that Nancy hates. But she weathers it as she waits for her mother’s decree.

“Have you finished all of your homework?”

“It’s done.” Nancy replies.

“Will Steve be joining you?”

“Mom. Yes, or no?”

“You’re rather fond of him, aren’t you?”

Nancy growls in annoyance. “Steve’s great, Mom.”

“You know that’s not who I meant. Very well. Just promise me you’ll be back before ten.”

“Uh, thanks,” Nancy says, her mission accomplished, but reeling at her mother’s blunt statement. She leaves the kitchen, but not before she catches her mother humming to herself.

She’s almost revolted by how he attacks his enormous hot dog. He barely chews before swallowing the bolus like a constrictor. But as

soon as it drains down his throat, he tears into another hefty bite. His beastly grunts of satisfaction do nothing to help his image.

“You weren’t kidding about the starving thing,” she chides.

When he can next speak, he replies, “Wasn’t all that hungry until now. Sure you don’t want a bite?”

“Ugh, no thanks.” He shrugs at her, then chows down once more. Leaning against the car door and with hands in her coat pockets, she waits patiently for him to finish off his defenseless meal. She occupies her attention away from his gruesome chore by taking in his modest home, familiar to her now, but in far better shape than when she was there last. It’s cozy, she thinks, when she doesn’t associate it with savage paranormal monsters. Far more cozy and intimate in comparison to her hulking spit of suburbia.

She would like to visit more often. To revisit the scene of the crime, perhaps, but to indulge in the memory of alphabet lights and holes in the wall. They must all be removed and repaired by now, she knows, but the strangeness of it, and the extent of his mother’s determination still humbles her.

Her focus turns to rove over the back of his head. The apple does not fall far.

When she sees him slowing down, she straightens up to join him, the latter seated on the hood of the car. She feels him tense when her elbow brushes him.

“Relax,” she says.

He swallows his final bite, licking his fingers, then wiping them clean with a cheap napkin. “Sorry.”

She doesn’t take her eyes off of him, letting herself adore his unique brand of weirdness as he pockets the napkin to fuss with his unruly hair next. Truly, he perplexes her, like a thriller novel she can’t wait to finish. Intrusively, she imagines leaning over and pecking him on the cheek, just as she did over Christmas.

“So, what are we doing?” she asks, taking her mind off of the

ridiculous notion.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he says, “To be honest, I’m not sure. We’re looking for weird creatures, I guess.”

“Weird creatures? Like animals?” She reels. “I’m sure the Chief knows someone in animal control.”

“Not those kind of animals.”

“I hope you don’t mean...”

“From the Upside Down.”

Nancy clenches. She hisses, “Why didn’t you say so earlier? I’d have brought the gun!”

“That’s the thing,” he says, sighing. “I’m not sure if they’re real. Only my mom has seen them. They might all just be in her head, but she’s waking up in the middle of the night because of it. She swears she’s seen them, though. So, to make her feel better, I’m going to make sure there are none in the house. She’d freak out if you brought a gun.”

“I see,” she says, looking down toward the gravel driveway.

“Sure you still want to help?”

Looking up sharply, “Hell yes. Definitely. You know, your Mom was right all along about Will.”

Jonathan’s eyes fall shut. “I know. That’s the other thing. To be honest, I’m not sure what I’m more afraid of. That she’s wrong and losing it, or she’s completely right and we’re all still in danger.”

The magnetism brimming under her skin pulses, and on its impulse she reaches into Jonathan’s pocket, covering his knuckles with her fingers. His eyes pop open at the contact. He is ice cold, but she burns with indignation. Nonetheless, she softens when she says, “Holy shit, Jonathan. You should have told me.”

“Sorry,” he mumbles. To her surprise, he rotates his hand so their

fingers interlock. She intended for her initial gesture to be reassuring, but she's stunned when she finds herself comfortable, even thrilled by his response. So she allows it, communicating her approval with a gentle squeeze.

"Nancy," he says. Her stomach knots whenever he says her name like that. She wants him to look at her, but his chin is tilted down. "Thanks. Hang on a minute."

In a blur, he lets her go and leaps down from the hood, circling to the driver's side door. He digs inside his car for a few seconds before pulling free his camera. He loops its strap around his neck, saying, "Not a gun, but it'll shoot."

She grins. "Good idea. Shall we?"

The gravel crunches beneath their shoes as they approach the Byers' residence, and Jonathan reaches out to gently open the front door. Nancy peers inside the living room behind him, where she spots Ms. Byers half-dozing on the sofa. The noise of Jonathan closing door disturbs the dog laying on the floor by her feet. He lifts his head and woofs, heralding their arrival. Joyce rouses, stretching like a cat before one of her eyes opens. Then the other. She lurches awake.

"Oh. Oh!" she starts, rolling herself into seated position. "Jonathan!" she hisses when she spots his companion. What are you thinking!"

"Mom, it's just Nancy."

The dog continues to woof and bark. "Shush, Chester!" Joyce scolds, and the animal bows its head and slinks from the room. Turning back to Jonathan, "Why on earth did you bring her over here? Tonight?" Ms. Byers pulls herself to her feet, crossing over to them.

Nancy tenses. She knows of, and even admires Ms. Byers' intense nature, but the latter's displeasure still makes her uncomfortable. She instinctively leans backward, but stops when she feels Jonathan's feather-light touch at her back. "I told her what's going on. She wants to help us out. Don't scare her off, please," he says.

"I'm not scared," Nancy says, stepping away from his touch and

toward Joyce. "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Byers. I know that this was unannounced, and I deeply apologize."

Ms. Byers hesitates, visibly caught off guard by her deference. After inhaling deeply, she holds up her hands and says, "It's alright, my dear. I was rude. I'm glad to see you again, too. I don't mean to imply that you're not welcome here. We were just talking about you at dinner, in fact."

"You were?" Nancy asks, shooting Jonathan a look. She fights the blush warming her cheeks.

"Kind of," he admits. "Mom says 'hello', by the way."

"Smart mouth," she says. She relaxes further, and the strained mood between them slackens. Turning back to Nancy, "It's just that you probably have enough drama in your life that you don't need any of ours as well."

"It's no problem, Ms. Byers," Nancy replies. "Jonathan's my friend."

It might have been the most earnest statement she made since she expressed her desire to trap and kill the monster on the night they finally went through with it. She found it easier to say *friend* than *he's my partner in this all monster-slaying stuff*. Her mind doesn't stick on *friend* like it does on *partner*, and all that the latter word implies.

"Please, you know you can call me Joyce." She shoots Jonathan a look, that same look Nancy hates on her own mother. She can tell that Jonathan loves it just as much when he lets out an exasperated sigh.

"Now that we've all said hello, let's just get to it," he says.

"Bedroom first," Joyce insists, leading them down the hallway. Reflexively, Nancy glances down at the spot where they incinerated the demon, now scrubbed clean of all traces of their victory. It hits her that Jonathan steps over this very spot, everyday.

In the bedroom, they overturn the mattress and box spring, they look under lampshades, and they pull out every drawer. Joyce scatters clothes, pillows, and bed sheets haphazardly, kicking them to the

side. Nancy helps her and Jonathan lift away the dresser from the wall so that they can inspect the back side. They find nothing but cobwebs, dead insects, and choking dust.

When the bedroom search proves fruitless, Jonathan asks his mother, "You said you saw one in the sink?"

She nods.

"Which one?"

Joyce leads them to the bathroom. All three crowd into the small room and peer into the sink basin, and down into the dark void of its drain. Jonathan raises his camera and snaps a photo.

"Do you see something?" Nancy whispers.

He shrugs. "No. Just thought I should."

Joyce frowns and shakes her head. "I swear there was something sticking out of the drain. Then I turned on the light and..." she trails off, gesturing to the bowl. "Gone."

After another beat, Nancy's stomach turns as an idea invades her mind, one she is loathe to accept. Phantom blood oozes from her palm and between her fingers. She swallows, then says, "Blood."

"What?" Joyce says.

Jonathan, however, tenses at the word. He knows exactly what she means.

"I'll do it," he says.

"Excuse me?" Joyce demands.

"The monster was drawn to blood," Nancy explains. "If it's here, maybe we can lure it out like we did before. And I'll do it." Yet as she volunteers, Jonathan darts from the bathroom and toward the kitchen. Nancy pursues him, with Joyce right behind. Jonathan opens a drawer in the kitchen and extracts a paring knife.

“Oh, no,” Joyce says, shaking her head vigorously. She pushes past Nancy and reaches out for Jonathan. “I can’t allow this, *whatever* you’re thinking. Not in my home.”

Nancy exchanges a knowing look with Jonathan, glad perhaps that Joyce remained foggy about the grim details surrounding the night she summoned the beast with Jonathan.

He says, “Mom. Do you want to find this thing, or not? Nancy’s idea will work.”

Joyce touches a hand to his holding the knife. She pauses, confounded by the question, but working through it.

“It doesn’t have to be much,” Nancy offers.

“It will really work?” Joyce asks.

“Yes,” Jonathan says, firmly.

Joyce’s hand slips down her son’s arm, and she takes the knife from him. Then, she bolts. He and Nancy scramble to follow her when Joyce takes off back toward the bathroom, blade glinting in her hand.

“Mom!” Jonathan calls. “Hey!”

But when they arrive, Joyce is holding the knife above the sink, the tip of her forefinger pressed to the edge. Nancy covers her mouth when Joyce slices her fingertip open, the latter possessing an unsettling focus about her as deep red blood drips into the basin.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, there is only silence except for the unnerving *plop-plop* of blood. “How much do we need?” Joyce grumbles, and she pinches her forefinger, squeezing out more.

“That should be enough,” Nancy says.

“Mom,” Jonathan gently warns. He reaches to the mirror and opens the medicine cabinet it conceals, careful not to interrupt his mother’s focus. He takes out ointment and bandages, passing the latter to Nancy.

"Damn it," Joyce hisses when, after another minute, nothing happens. With care, Jonathan takes the knife and places it in the sink. Next, he gently takes her injured hand.

"No!" Joyce says, ripping her hand away. She pushes past them once more and heads for the bedroom. Jonathan calls to her again, but with the same lack of success as before. In the bedroom, Joyce falls hard onto her knees and smears her bloody digit along the floor.

"That'll get infected!" Jonathan admonishes, kneeling next to her. He grabs her by the wrist.

"Come out, you bastards!" Joyce calls. She leans back into her son's shoulder, allowing him to take her hand. With shaky fingers, he applies the ointment. Nancy does not miss a beat, coming behind to wrap Joyce's finger.

"I'm sorry," Nancy says as she smooths over the adhesive.

"Don't be," Jonathan says to her. He turns back to his mother.

"Come out," Joyce repeats, pleading. Joyce's attention is everywhere in the room except on them, her eyes darting to and fro. Her lips crease as defeat creeps up and over her. She slumps backward against Jonathan's shoulder. "I'm not crazy, Jonathan. I'm not."

"I know, Mom."

Nancy is about to add her words of reassurance, when a distant gurgling noise enters her ears, and she holds back the air in her lungs. Instead, she focuses on what it could be. It sounds like an off-balance washer, or if someone were stomping through a full bathtub.

"Do you hear that?" she says.

"Hear wha-," Jonathan starts, but the expression on his face freezes when he catches the sound, too. "Mom, listen," he whispers.

Then, Chester starts barking. Jonathan supports Joyce as she rises to her feet. The sloshing sounds draw her from bedroom and back toward the hallway, and again towards the washroom. Chester is there in the hall, barking at whatever anomaly lurks inside. The

strange, wet noises grow louder as they approach and push aside Chester, who calms at the scratch Jonathan gives behind his ear. They file inside, and Nancy reels when her shoes land in water.

The bathroom floor is soaked. She looks up, homing in on the noise--the commode. No one speaks as the water in the toilet bowl churns and roils, so violently that it lifts the lid and sloshes up and over the rim.

“What is that?” Nancy whispers, voicing the question foremost on their collective minds. Jonathan snaps another photo. “Jonathan,” she hisses.

“What?” he replies.

Then, suddenly, the motion stops. An eerie calm returns. Nancy does not like the way Joyce’s shoulders are quivering. Wordlessly, Joyce reaches for the plunger beside the toilet.

“Mom,” Jonathan breaths, reaching out to touch her arm. Next, he carefully snakes his finger under the lid, then flings it open while stepping back. All three of them crane to peer inside.

Nothing. There’s nothing abnormal inside. Just trembling water, and spots of scum. They all fall back on their heels, with either relief, or disappointment, or perhaps some mixture of both.

“I can get some towels,” Nancy offers, unsure of what else to say.

The plunger slips from Joyce’s fingers. Suddenly, the shrill ring of the phone fills the house. Except for Nancy’s wince of surprise, it rings twice before anyone moves.

“I’ll get it,” Jonathan says. As he leaves, Nancy steps towards Joyce, and she wonders if the latter hears the phone at all. Her chest is tight with sympathy as Joyce looks all but lost.

“It’s happening again,” she says to Nancy, bringing a closed fist to her breast. She raps her knuckles against her breastbone. “Nothing makes sense, but in my heart, nothing is coincidence. I don’t know what to do, how to figure this out.” She thumbs tears from her eyes. “I must seem like such a basket case to you.”

She allows Nancy to touch her at the elbow. “On the contrary. I believe you,” she whispers. It’s no lie. She feels the same dread, the same confusion as though, like the water below, it were seeping up through her pant legs. Joyce snaps to her, her eyes glassy.

“Thank you, dear,” Joyce says, the corner of her lip curving up. “Thank you.”

“Mom! Nancy!”

Jonathan stampedes back to them. He is pale as he hovers just outside in the hallway. “That was the Wheelers. Mom, we gotta leave it. It’s Will.”

Joyce blanches. “Oh, God. What’s wrong?”

“He’s sick.” As he says the words, he brings his knuckles to his lips, his expression pained as though fighting back a scream. His shoulders rise and fall with anxious gulps of air.

“Sick!” Joyce repeats, her expression cracking. “What’s wrong with him!”

He removes the fist from his mouth to say, “They’ve called an ambulance. I’m so sorry. He didn’t look right before I dropped him off. I should have-,”

Joyce grabs him by the arm. “Ambulance! What do you mean ‘he didn’t look right’?”

“I don’t know! He was pale and clammy, but seemed to get instantly better before I dropped him off. He seemed so normal, I doubted myself, and ugh, shit!”

Nancy follows the exchange, unnerved by the rising panic looping between them. Her composure remains steady, however, even hardened by the panic. “Jonathan.”

Her calm interruption cuts through, and she gains their undivided attention. “Joyce,” she says. “Come on. We need to get home right away.”

“You’re right, Nancy,” she says. “You’re absolutely right. Oh my God, Will!”

Nancy tugs on Jonathan’s arm. He drags like a heavy sack at first, but lightens as he keeps pace with her. She can hear the splash of Joyce’s footsteps following. When they reach the living room, Nancy lets Jonathan go for him to fumble inside coat pocket and extract the car keys. Joyce hears the jingle and snatches them from him.

“I’m driving,” she insists, bursting past them and out the front door.

“Thanks,” he says to Nancy. He wipes his eyes with a finger.

She wonders how many times she will hear that and thinks, *you don’t have to say it anymore.*

“Let’s go,” she says.

Notes for the Chapter:

The Byers' dog does not have an official canon name, but I'm defaulting to 'Chester' since, [according to the wikiverse](#), that was the name in the pilot script.

Hope you all are still enjoying this. Thank you for the feedback so far

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Once again, thank you for the feedback so far. Kinda on a roll with this so I hope you all want more here in the next few days.

The drive to the Wheelers' feels interminable, even though his mother's foot is a dead weight on the gas pedal. He fidgets, thumbing at the camera nestled in his lap. He tries not to focus on his pulse hammering away in under his chin. He tilts his head to check on his mother through the rear-view mirror. She has her fingers wrapped tight around the steering wheel, and the mirror shows her brow knitted, and her stare fixed out along the night-shrouded road.

She insisted Nancy ride in the back with him. Nancy agreed, and readily. He doesn't know why. He glances over to her.

"It'll be alright," Nancy tells him. She somehow knows he is watching her, even though she doesn't look at him, and that bothers him even more.

So her statement lances him like a blister, and his unease spills out before he can contain it. "How can you possibly know?"

That gets her attention. "Sorry," she says.

And he turns away, immediately feeling like an asshole. His pounding heart sinks like a brick into his stomach. He should still be thanking her, again and again. If not for her decisive action, he might still be at the house, paralyzed with shock, while his mom melted into the river covering the bathroom floor. It was one instance among several.

He's not sure what he would have done without her.

"Nancy," is all he says, having scarcely an idea of how to express that he wasn't pissed, that her very presence reassures him, despite Will's condition and the future itself remaining as one big, suffocating question mark.

“Yeah?” she says, quiet, but it gives him a shot of courage. In his imagination, it transports him back to his couch, when she finished wrapping the wound on his hand.

“You’re right,” he says, absentmindedly flexing his scarred hand in the empty space between them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches an odd smirk on her lips, as if he just told her a terrible joke, and she was more amused by its badness than the joke itself. She sighs before returning to the window, while he kicks himself at how ridiculous and stupid he must seem.

But his mouth goes dry when her hand covers his. He darts to the contact, warm and shocking, but she’s still looking away, outside the window. She can’t see his composure coming apart. Just when he believed these fleeting, stirring moments were over for good, here they have become all too common between them now, and he wants to shout that it’s unfair for this - whatever it is - to be so casual. His misdirected unease returns, and he knows it’s misdirected, but he cannot help but swallow the thought burgeoning in his stomach. It was a passing one before, but now, it was urgent and foremost. *Steve.*

Steve is a friend. A good friend, one he owes a life debt to since the latter intervened against the monster last fall. And when Nancy’s touch exhilarates him, when her voice soothes him, and when her perfume intoxicates him, it’s a betrayal. The betrayals compound, and the debt grows.

But he swallows it down, and he closes his eyes. He chances a stroke of his thumb against her knuckle. He hates himself.

He leans against another turn around a corner. He recognizes the rows of nicer houses, and the frequency of turns increases. They are almost there. He lurches awake, ripping his hand away from Nancy when Joyce says, “Shit!”

Whirling red lights wash over them. “Oh, God,” Nancy says, covering her mouth at the the ambulance parked in her family’s driveway. They jostle about as Joyce speeds them onto the curb and stops short with the brake. She’s out of the car before he and Nancy can remove

their seatbelts.

As he and Nancy follow her, he notices that there is no one outside, but the front door of the Wheelers' is wide open. He catches up with Nancy as his mother knocks, then steps inside. Nancy's sister's cries pierce throughout the house. Voices and commotion lead them to the next wide open door of the basement.

"Karen?" Joyce calls down the steps.

"She's here, thank goodness." Karen's voice bounces back up. "Joyce! Will's down here!"

There, Will lies prone and catatonic on the floor. An emergency team flanks him-- a technician, kneeling on one side, and a medical officer, standing and writing notes on the other. Karen hovers nearby, while Mike, Dustin, and Lucas huddle on the other side of the stairs, restless over the events unfolding.

"Will!" his mother exclaims when she absorbs the scene. Her footing almost slips as she descends the last few steps. "I'm his mother! What's happening?"

Karen says, "Nancy, will you please go calm down Holly?"

Nancy stops in her tracks, halfway along the stairs. Jonathan glances feebly to her, and she retreats back up with a huff. He continues on without her.

"I'm his brother," he says to the medics.

The officer takes a deep breath, then says, "He's not in any danger."

Jonathan reels. His brother did not just look ill. He looked like a fresh corpse. He's about to say so, when Karen interjects: "Not in any danger"? My son says he just collapsed while they were playing. He looks *ghoulish*, and you're saying there's no danger?"

Joyce gives her an appreciative nod, as though she took the very words directly from her mouth.

The officer is unfazed, saying, "He's stable, ma'am. In fact, we didn't

find anything we needed to stabilize when we arrived, and suspect he just had a fainting spell. He's lucky not to have hit his head on the way down. He may be a little dehydrated, though, so we can transport him to emergency and make sure he gets fluids. He should be back to his old self by tomorrow. You're welcome to ride with me, miss...?"

"Byers," Joyce says. "Joyce Byers. You call that a little dehydrated?"

"He seemed pretty sick earlier," Jonathan says.

The officer nods. "Well, if he's got an infection, then that might explain it. I want to assure you, we are taking this very seriously and will provide him with the best care we know how. Now, does that door lead outside?" He points to the basement door.

"Yes," Karen confirms.

"Wait just a minute!" Joyce says. "Did you check everything, and I mean everything?"

"How do you mean?" the officer asks.

"Are you sure that's all that's wrong with him? He looks like...he looks like..."

She struggles to finish, and the officer sighs. "Ma'am, I sympathize with you, but all we are able to do is to ensure your son is stable enough to transport to the hospital. The doctors will have to determine what's wrong..."

As his mother argues with the officer, Jonathan's suddenly unnerved by their presence, beyond the gravity of Will's condition. His attention floats to the technician kneeling beside Will. He's prodding his sternum. Then, his throat, followed by the inside of his lip. He pulls a swab from his belt and runs it along the inside of Will's cheek, and Jonathan bristles. When the technician next pulls a needle out and pricks Will's finger, he snaps.

"What are you doing?"

The technician glances up at him. "Just checking vitals."

“Bullshit. Get out,” Jonathan demands.

The officer stops mid-sentence, and he and Joyce turn to him.

“Leave,” Jonathan insists. “If it’s just dehydration, we can take care of it. Thank you for your time, but please go.”

“Jonathan,” Joyce says, her brow knitting. Karen crosses her arms, just as puzzled with him.

“That’s inadvisable, and we could be held liable if his condition declined. We will transport him,” the officer says flatly.

“We’ll sign whatever waiver that will cover your asses,” Jonathan replies. “Just get the hell out, and don’t touch my brother again!”

“Jonathan!” Joyce admonishes.

“*Awesome...*” whispers from the boys huddled behind him. Dustin, he thinks. “*See? His bro’s a badass. Nothing to worry...*”

Jonathan says, “Mom, I don’t trust them.”

The technician kneeling beside Will pockets the sample, then rises to his feet. He fires back, “Young man, perhaps it’s best you join your girlfriend upstairs and cool off those hormones, what do you say?”

“Excuse me?” Karen says.

“Do not speak to my son that way,” Joyce says. “I will call your superiors. I know Chief Hopper personally.”

“Be my flippin’ guest,” the technician says, all pretense of professionalism gone.

Something was off-- very off, but Jonathan’s anger boils over. He steps forward, ready to throw the asshole out the door himself, when suddenly, a fit of coughing erupts from Will. After a few sputters, he rolls upright, hand flying to his mouth. All eyes fall on him.

“Will!” Joyce says, squatting beside him, stroking his back until his violent convulsing subsides.

“Mom?” he asks, groggy.

She pulls him into a tight embrace. “Oh, sweetie, thank goodness. How do you feel?”

“I’m fine, Mom. I think,” he says. He looks around to the medics, to Karen, then to Jonathan, then to his friends. “Oh. Sorry.”

Jonathan says to the emergency crew, “See? We don’t need you, so get lost!” He points to the basement door leading out. That earns him another titter from the boys.

The officer shakes his head, then glances towards his partner. He nods. At that, the officer says, “Fine. But if the kid has a seizure, or something worse, everyone here will know it was on *your* head,” he says, pointing to Jonathan.

“So be it,” he replies.

The officer clicks his tongue. To Joyce, “What kind of a mother are you?”

Joyce releases Will and bolts to her feet, her fists clenched in fury. But Karen responds, “Get the hell out of my house, before I call the police instead!”

The officer grumbles, rolling his eyes as he turns to leave. “Jesus,” he tosses over his shoulder as they retreat.

The basement door slams shut. “In all my life,” Karen says. “Those are supposed to be professionals? I’ll be calling the newspaper tomorrow. I am so sorry, Joyce.”

Jonathan, meanwhile, his fingers graze along the camera hanging about his midsection, then pursues the medics. The gravel and dirt crunch as he follows, ensuring the ambulance pulls back and drives away from the house. Far, far away. But in addition, just as the ambulance begins to drive off, he lifts his camera and snaps the photo.

He feels eyes on his back. He glances back over his shoulder to the Wheelers’ house. The front door is closed, and its lights are dark. In

the second floor window, however, there's a familiar silhouette in the warm yellow light. He raises his hand. She waves back. But when his mother comes around the corner with Will, he supposes he will have to be content with seeing her again tomorrow.

Notes for the Chapter:

I realized that at the end of chapter 5, I might have been a little foggy about the exact layout of the Byers' house. If anyone has any corrections to details like that, I am open to them!

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

Call me butter, 'cause I'm on a roll. I hope this is all still consistent with expectations (read: it doesn't suck)

Holly squirms, and Nancy bobs her on her hip as she watches Jonathan, Joyce, and Will climb into their car. She heaves a sigh of relief at the apparent recovery latter, but her confusion is overwhelming. She had heard the muffled voices and shouting from the basement. One was Jonathan's, she's sure. At the time, she wanted nothing more than to rush downstairs, even if she had to haul her fussy sister down with her. But just as rapidly as the shouting came, the house fell silent, save for a door slam that shook the building.

From the second floor window, she witnessed the paramedics beating a hasty retreat along their driveway, but without Will in tow. Instead, she saw Jonathan tailing them as they jumped in the ambulance and pulled out from their driveway. Jonathan took a photo of the vehicle, which puzzled her further. Then, he turned and spotted her, and when she returned his wave, and every nerve in her body screamed for her to put Holly down, run outside, and flood him with questions. But Holly squirmed and cried, and did not settle until Nancy pulled a book from her shelf and read her to sleep. By the time Holly conked out, the Byers were long gone.

So now, she stalks her brother for an agonizing half an hour until the boys adjourn for the evening. Hovering just inside her bedroom door, she presses her ear to it, listening for Mike to trudge up the stairs. When she hears him tread across the hall outside her room, she strikes.

"They didn't take him?" Nancy asks, pulling Mike inside her room.

"Whoa," Mike says, backing up. "Geez. You could have just asked me to come in like a normal person."

“Sorry. Tell me what happened.”

Mike smooths out his shirt, blinking as he recalled the events. “Oh, right. Okay, well, before you got here, we were in the basement, when Will started to look weird, like this.” He demonstrates by rolling his eyes up and sucking in his cheeks.

“Ugh.”

“Yeah, and then he faints. Or whatever the boy equivalent is.”

“It’s still ‘faint’,” she assures him.

“Right, okay. So we flip, I get Mom, who calls 911, then the Byers’. Wait,” he pauses, squinting at her. “You were over there, weren’t you? You were with them when they got here.”

In most cases, she’s proud her brother is so perceptive. Too much for his own good, sometimes. Nonetheless, her impulse is to lie through her teeth, reasoning that it’s none of his business. But just as she thinks to make up some fiction, she sighs. It’s too much trouble. She just wants to know the truth.

“I was,” she admits.

“You’re still dating Steve, though, right?”

She folds her arms and answers, “Yes?”

“Uh-huh. Well, I know you said you don’t like him like that, but it’s too bad it’s not Jonathan.”

His blunt remark collides with her stomach, hard, and her cheeks instantly are on fire. “Why?” she croaks out.

Mike shakes his head and whistles. “Sis, you should have seen it. We thought something was fishy about those medic guys, then Jonathan loses it. Dustin so called it.”

She huffs, amused, and curious. “Called what?”

“That Jonathan’s got a finely-tuned bullshit detector, too. And he’s

not someone to screw with.”

She winces inwardly, recalling their argument in the woods. Jonathan called her out before, and his incisive words still stung, even months later. “True enough.”

“We think he’s pretty cool, so if it doesn’t work out with Steve, you should think about it. I think he’d say yes.”

She refuses to think about it. *Not now.* “*Thank* you for the input, Mike. What happened after that?”

“But anyway, then Will woke up while we were all down there. He seemed okay after that, except for the cough.” His face falls. “But he has that all the time now.”

“The cough?”

“Yeah, like he’s got the mother of all loogies in his lungs.”

“Gross. He hasn’t said anything about it?”

“Nope.”

Her brow furrows. *Jonathan must hear it all the time.* “Alright. Thanks, Mike. Sorry for startling you.”

“No problem, Nancy.” He awkwardly pats her on the upper arm, then goes to the doorknob to leave.

“Wait a minute.”

Mike pauses just as his hand rests on the knob, and turns to his sister.

“How, um,” she starts. “How have you been holding up?”

Mike’s gaze drops to the floor, his expression devoid of any apparent emotion. “I don’t know. It hurts all the time, even though we got Will back. After tonight, though, I’m not so sure,” he says, softly.

“What do you mean?”

He lets go of the doorknob. “Just got a bad feeling,” he says. “Like

when we needed to hide El.”

“We’ll figure it out, Mike. Whatever’s going on. Whatever happens, we’ll look out for each other. Okay?” Nancy says.

Mike smiles. “Yeah. Thanks.” Nancy returns the smile.

But then, a glint flashes in Mike’s eye, and he says, “Just let me know the next time you plan on visiting the Byers’.” Before she can reply to his remark, and his equally audacious smirk in her direction, he bolts from her room. A grunt of annoyance leaves her throat.

Her clock reads 8:47PM. Now, in this moment of calm, the idea of calling Steve pricks her conscience, but she hesitates. Until now, he did not cross her mind the entire evening. Worse, as she stares at the phone on the nightstand, her uncooperative mind urges her to call the Byers instead. She wonders how Will is doing, how Joyce is doing, how they’re dealing with the mess they made that evening. Jonathan would reassure her, but could she do the same?

His voice alone would reassure her, she admits. Only yesterday would it have been Steve’s with that power. The confusion makes her chest ache.

Wrestling her focus away from the phone, she falls back onto the bed. *She will have to tell Steve eventually.* A wave of mild nausea prevents her from reaching for the phone, even as the minutes tick by. So she stews, until she drifts into a fitful sleep.

A dusting of snow coated Hawkins overnight. Nancy welcomes the dry chill as she leaves for school that morning, her shivers helping to shake off her haze of fatigue. Whenever she woke during the night, she reached for the right side of the bed, her hand grasping nothing but cold sheets.

She plans to pounce on Jonathan at his locker. Yet she does not pounce so much as stalk, and quite openly about his locker, until she senses the telltale prickle in her skin. In the next instant, she spots

him lumbering towards her. She checks her watch. Plenty of time before first bell.

“Jonathan,” she calls, waving.

He sees her, and slows his stride. He clears his throat as he approaches. “Hey. Sorry about last night.”

“Wasn’t your fault Mom tagged me for baby duty.”

“Right. Still, I’m kind of glad you weren’t there.” He opens his locker and pulls his bag off of his shoulder.

She leans on the locker next to him, crossing her arms. “Really? Mike tells me you lost your mind at the paramedics.”

He pauses, resuming his motions as he says, “Of course he did.”

“Well? You must have had a good reason?”

His adam’s apple bobs, then he says, “I just got a bad feeling.” Nancy’s brow knits at the echo of Mike’s words. He places some books into his locker, and shoves others back into his bag. “Like Will was some kind of lab rat to them. And they were rude as hell. Mom got in touch with Hopper, and he said he’d look into it.”

“I guess you did the right thing.”

“Maybe.”

“And how is Will?”

“Fine. Hey, listen,” He turns suddenly to her. “I’m going to develop the pictures this afternoon.”

“I can meet you after seventh,” she says, assuming the invitation.

He hesitates.

“Jonathan?”

“I can do it by myself. I’ll let you know if there’s anything odd. You should maybe let Steve in on what’s going on if you haven’t already.”

Her jaw tightens. "Why?"

"Why? What do you mean, why?"

She's not certain herself. The question left her lips before she realized it.

Jonathan shuts his locker, continuing, "I want to be in this together. I do. But I can't...we can't be going behind his back like this this time. He was there for us when it mattered."

"But-, um, okay. You're right," she stammers, caught off guard by this turn of events. "But we can loop him in at lunch, see what he thinks."

"Can't. I have to pick up some things for Will. Mom kept him home today."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry," he says, throwing his bag back over his shoulder. He charges down the hall, away from her.

"Jonathan."

He turns back to her. Tears threaten to trickle from the corners of her tired eyes, and she can't figure out why.

If it doesn't work out with Steve, you should think about it.

"See you," she says, dumbly.

The corner of his lip tugs, then he disappears among the thickening crowds of students. She turns and knocks her forehead against the lockers.

Lunchtime. In a repeat of the day before, she retrieves her tray and beelines for their table, her mind occupied with nothing else but Jonathan, and the mystery that embroiled his life and, by extension, hers. Among the possibilities she weighs, it crosses her mind to walk

away from it all, and allow everything to sort itself naturally. She paid her dues during that harrowing week. She earned the right to file it away into some far off corner of her consciousness, and go about the rest of her average life in an average town, doing average teenage things.

She samples the average existence in her imagination, and it seems so strange and foreign, like standing on the edge of a vast canyon, and looking back to the other side. The abyss between past and present is daunting, but she could make the leap back. Eventually, she could mend the split. She tasted that success, for a time, over Christmas.

What makes her different from Jonathan, she realizes, is that he doesn't have the possibility of going back, of walking away. The chasm between his carefree past and the burdensome present is ancient and limitless. Abandoning him now is unthinkable. The memory of Barb flashes through her mind. It's the last pang of conscience she needs to spur her resolve. *She would see this through.*

The gnaw of hunger in her belly vanishes when she hears, "Nancy. Nancy!"

Steve waves at her from the table. With so much fogging her mind, she can hardly look at him. She as plunks the tray down and seats herself before responding, "He's not coming."

He pulls back slightly and tilts his head. "Oh. Okay, but that's not what I was going to ask you. Hey, are you mad at me?" he dips down to catch her eyes.

"No," she says, shaking her head. She wills herself to focus on the present, and on him. "Yeah, just didn't sleep so well. Sorry. What's up?"

"You do look exhausted. Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine."

He sits back, and seems to accept the reply. "I hope so. Because let me just say, my parents are going out of town this weekend," he says, grinning.

“That’s not a question.”

“Sure it is. What have we learned about context clues?”

“That in the context of you, I can assume impure thoughts?”

He shrugs. “Some are pure. Very pure.” The look on his face, like that of a child begging for ice cream, makes her smile. The worries at the forefront of her mind threaten to cascade out, but where does she start? Meanwhile, Steve’s eyebrows waggle, broadcasting that his priorities are elsewhere. Her stomach knots.

“I thought you were going to check on Jonathan this weekend?” she points out.

“Well, yeah. Like, Saturday morning,” Steve replies, scooping a bite of corn into his mouth. “Then I thought maybe we can spend some time together in the afternoon at my house.”

She resigns to start here. “Don’t bother,” she says. “To tell you the truth, I saw him last night.”

“Who? Byers?”

She nods. She pretends not to catch the split-second grimace that crosses Steve’s face.

“Like, just in passing?” His gaze falls, fixating on the corn nestled in his tray, and scoops up another mouthful.

“No. I went over to his house. He picked me up, and I helped him search his house. His mom believes there are creatures crawling around at night.”

“Oh.” Steve chews, while his face contorts as he processes the flurry of information. “Creatures? Not like...not like that?” He glances at her, and a kernel peeks over his lip as he forgets to swallow.

“No. At least, I don’t think.”

Tension leaves his shoulders, and he licks the kernel away and pushes his bite down his throat. “Thank god. I still have nightmares about

that thing. Did you find any?"

She looks down to her helping of sliced meat. "No."

"I wish you had called me," Steve says.

"I forgot. Will collapsed at my house."

"What?"

"Jonathan's brother. Ambulance came and everything, but I guess he got better, so nothing more came of it, thankfully. So yeah, crazy night."

"Wow. Okay. That does explain the bags under your eyes. And what's been eating Byers lately." He leans in. "So, does this all mean I can cancel Saturday morning and come pick you up instead?"

Her ears pull back. His shameless attempt to wrest control the conversation, and back to that topic, annoys her. So she says, "I want to meet him in the dark room after school today."

He puts down his fork. After a heavy breath, he says tersely, "Am I invited?"

"Steve."

"Come on, Nancy."

She hesitates. "Yes. You're invited. Jonathan wanted me to tell you about all this, anyway."

"And did you want to?"

She wants to reply, but her throat closes. It worsens when Steve suddenly rises to his feet with his book bag and his food tray.

"You know what? Nevermind about this weekend. You've clearly have more pressing engagements."

With that, he extracts himself from the table and delivers his uneaten lunch onto the tray return, then exits the cafeteria. She bows her

head, and tries to ignore her nearby classmates and their probing stares.

8. Chapter 8

The enlarger light snaps off, and he transfers the print into the developer bath. With tongs, he pushes the sheet around in the liquid, and gently rocks the tray. The image of his mother's bedroom sharpens. After about a minute, he transfers it to the stopper bath, and after another minute, the fixer. His movements are practiced to the precision of a well-calibrated computer, and he's just as disengaged from the whole process, as though a robot on an assembly line. After a long wash under the sink, he hangs the print with a clothespin and begins again.

The red light hums. He heaves a sigh, stress evaporating from his tired muscles. The darkroom is a sanctuary, and the motions are his ritual, his meditation. The low-stimulus is a welcome reprieve from the glaring, chaotic world outside, and the dull, formulaic process never fails to soothe his troubled mind.

Will stayed up all night coughing. It was difficult for Jonathan to leave for school that morning, but his mother insisted he take the break. His heavy eyes begged him for sleep, and he imagines settling in for a nap on the darkroom floor.

Just as he dips the next print into the developer, a knock comes to the door. It's so faint, he first assumes - and hopes - someone just brushed against it in passing. But when the knock comes again, he winces, quickly shaking the tray before releasing it to answer.

He cracks open the door. The sanctuary crumbles around him. He's all at once glad, angry, and terrified.

"Hey," Nancy says, the sliver of her peeking at him between the door and its frame.

"Hey," he replies, making no other move.

"Can I come in?"

"What are you doing here?"

“Just let me in.”

He huffs. There’s no time to argue while his print sits in the developer. “Quickly,” he says, moving back to the developer tray while Nancy slips in. He taps the print with the tongs, then transfers it to the stopper. Lifting the corner of the tray up and down, he waits, listening to her fill her lungs.

“I told Steve,” rushes out from her.

“Good.” Up and down, up and down. An awkward thirty seconds or so tick by. He taps the print and moves it to the fixer solution. He’s full of anticipation, but for what, he doesn’t know.

“He’s not happy with me,” she blurts, as though a confession.

He turns to look at her. Her back is pressed against the door, and her lip quivers as she brings a hand up to pinch her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” is all he can think to say.

In an instant, she composes herself, and comes to stand next to him. The dim red light flatters her, and his pulse quickens. She draws in close. “What have you got so far?”

He removes it as she does so, putting space between them. He brings it under the faucet and turns on the tap. “Just finished the ones of the bedroom. This one should be the sink.” He swallows a lump forming in his throat. He does so again when he senses her at his back, close. “Nancy?”

His breath catches, and all coherent thought flies from his head when she does exactly what he feared: her arms snake under his, and she clasps her hands just below his sternum. The soft pressure of her cheek against his back is so heady, the tongs nearly slip from his grasp. She says nothing. He says nothing. He tilts his head back as they seem to connect as live wires, the volatile heat melding them together. He’s not naive enough to hope, but the serenity of his sanctuary returns as he listens to her breathing-- shaky at first, then steady.

Yet after another beat, a surge of indignation destroys his peace.

“Nancy.”

She does not reply, but loosens her grip.

“Nancy,” he says, insistent. “Please don’t do this.”

“Do what?” She releases him and steps back.

He rotates at his waist, looking over his shoulder. “Don’t run to me when you’re upset about Steve.”

Her eyes drop to the floor, like a scolded child. Not for the first time, the ensuing pang of conscience informs him that he is in fact an asshole.

“You know how I feel about you,” he admits, and his sudden impulse to do so astonishes him. To underscore, he opens his scarred palm, and rotates it up toward her. He once imagined some far off day, if it happened at all, as the day he gave voice to his unrequited feelings. Yet he gives nothing away and falls silent, letting the loaded statement stand on its own-- and condemns himself to whatever punishment fate deemed appropriate for his impudence. She stands as motionless as a statue, the suspense pulling his throat closed as though a noose.

When his lungs ache and he can no longer stand it, he glances down at the print, rotating it back and forth with his wrist.

“Jonathan, I-,” she starts.

This time, the tongs drop from his hand. They clatter down into the basin, and the noise startles her. “*Shit*,” she hisses.

But he reaches down, snatching up the print and turning it over to the developed side. “Nancy,” he says, bringing it over to her. “That wasn’t there, was it?”

She collects herself, then she takes a look at the photo along with him. Her eyes bug when she spots it: a thick, black blotch climbing in - or out - of the drain. “No, it wasn’t. What the hell?”

He dashes for the door, with beads of water dripping from the photo,

and Nancy follows. In the harsh light of the hallway, he examines the photo again, with her leaning over his shoulder. He squints, then his brow knits with confusion.

“It’s gone,” he says. The sink basin is white and unmarred, and the drain is clear. “You saw it, too, right?”

She looks at him, her eyes wide. “Yeah. It was right there,” she confirms, pointing to the spot next to the drain. “What is going on?”

“Come on,” he says, leading them back into the darkroom. When the door shuts, he is stunned. The dark splotch reappears.

“We can only see it in red light?” she guesses.

Jonathan shakes his head. “Or maybe just indirect light. That would explain...” he trails off.

“Your mother seeing them, too,” she finishes for him.

He struggles to breathe. The implications hit him all at once, and he wants to race home to his mother, to Will.

“The rest of the photos.” Going to where the other photos hung to dry, she plucks one off. It’s a wide shot of his mother’s bedroom. He struggles to focus in the low light, but she nods to the darkroom door.

They exit. Several small dark spots on the ceiling disappear in the bright light of the hall. When back in the low light of the room, they return in the blink of an eye.

“They’re everywhere, Jonathan. What do we do?”

Before his overwhelmed brain can concoct a respectable answer, a banging erupts at the door. Both of them stare at it, then, the banging starts a second time.

“Nancy, Byers. I know you’re in there.”

Nancy closes her eyes, tight. “Steve.”

"I got it." Jonathan leaves the photo with her and answers the door.

There, Steve is leaning forward against it, his fist clenched. "Hey."

"Hey, man." Jonathan slips outside to join him.

"So? When were you going to fill me in?"

"Sorry. I've had a lot going on. I thought Nancy told you."

"She did. Where is she?"

As if to answer, she creeps out into the hallway.

Steve stuffs his hands in his pockets and shifts on his feet. "Nancy, I just wanted to say," he starts, glancing back to Jonathan. He sees Nancy tense, and so he makes sure to put himself between them.

He backs down, however, when Steve says, "That I'm sorry, and I was a huge prick. You wouldn't worry so much if you didn't have a good reason. I just felt like I was being left out, and I got pissed."

"It's okay," Nancy says. At that, Jonathan backs off, allowing her to step forward. He shrinks from the smile he sees on her face. It sinks in, and without warning it wrenches him. His arm shoots for the darkroom door, his only path of escape.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

Wasn't it obvious, he thinks, but holds his tongue. He slips inside, and the insufferable twinge in his chest subsides a little, but only just. Steve's and Nancy's voices are muffled, then she laughs. The sound echoes in his ears, rolling through an irrational part of him, provoking a swell of heartache. *You idiot*. He reaches up to grab a fistful of hair as he fights, fights so hard not to crack.

When he looks over to the enlarger, it reminds him of his more pressing concerns. He remembers to breathe, and the pressure subsides. He still has the unruly commode in his film roll to develop, and his receding anguish leaves behind a cold dread.

A courtesy knock comes to the door as he is placing the print in the

developer, and Nancy joins him again with Steve in tow.

“I want to show him,” she says. Jonathan nods, wiping underneath his nose with his sleeve.

While Jonathan continues developing and treating the picture, Nancy demonstrates the disappearing images as they discovered before. When they return to the darkroom, Steve is visibly unsettled, rubbing the back of his neck as he paces.

“You’re sure this isn’t some special, magic print paper? Are you guys pranking me?”

“No, we aren’t. Get a grip,” Nancy says.

“Nancy,” Jonathan calls, dropping the developed print into the stopper. Already, he can see it. A pitch black, snake-like object, blurry with motion, sticking out from underneath the lid. She gasps.

“Holy shit!” Steve says.

“So what do we do?” the latter asks.

“I need to get home,” Jonathan says. He snatches down all the hanging photographs and throws them into his bag.

Nancy says, “Wait. What are you going to do?”

“I have to tell Mom. I’ve got to get her and Will out of there!”

“No, I mean, how are you going to convince them what’s going on?”

He halts just as he reaches the door. He has no idea, but they had to believe him.

Steve says, “I’m pretty sure my dad has a hand lamp lying around somewhere. If we can get a filtered bulb, we could search your house again.”

Jonathan turns, nodding with silent awe. His morale soars. “That’s a great idea, man.”

"I'll head straight home and look around the garage," Steve says.

"I'll swing by the hardware store," Jonathan says. "Meet me at my house at six."

"You got it, Byers."

"I'm sure my Mom has some empty pickle jars laying around," Nancy says. "Maybe we can catch one, and show the Chief. He'll help us figure out what to do."

"I'll pick you up once I'm done," Steve says to her. She nods.

After a quick rinse of the tongs, Jonathan throws them in his bag. "It's a plan."

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, soooo I haven't developed film probably since high school myself, so I am pretty sure I got the general steps right, BUT if there are any glaring errors, please let me know.

Thanks for reading!

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Twofer today!!

“Out? Again?” her mother asks.

“Please, Mom,” Nancy says.

“And what do you need a pickle jar for?”

“Science project.”

“What kind of science project?”

“Biology.”

Karen frowns, her brow severe. “Fine. Just be sure to clean it out thoroughly once you’re done so I can sterilize it.” She throws open a cabinet and reaches for a quart-sized jar.

Nancy nods. “No problem, Mom. Thanks.”

Before her mother hands the jar to her, she says, “Nancy, you are a smart girl, and I know I can’t baby you forever. But I’m worried. College applications aren’t far away, you know.”

“I know, Mom. Steve is helping me make sure I stay focused.”

Outside, and as if on cue, a car horn blares.

Karen lets go of the jar at that. “Well, alright. Just be careful.”

Nancy flies to the front door with the glass jar in her arms, vaguely listening as her mother begs her to slow down. The moment she settles in the passenger seat of Steve’s car, she releases a sigh.

“You got it?” she asks.

Steve glances to the back seat. There, the hand lamp rests.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Yeah."

He shifts the gear and they pull away from the curb. She's unsure if it was the side effects of their spat at lunchtime, or their general apprehension about what they were about to do, but they ride in silence for an uncomfortable few moments into the car ride.

The time and silence allow her too much space to think. To think about what she was prevented from saying to Jonathan in the dark room. Her visit wasn't due to having attacks of conscience about Steve.

Only love makes you that crazy, and that damn stupid. She could never get the words out of her mind. They touch down in her consciousness periodically and unbidden like a whirlwind, and each time the havoc on her desires grew more difficult to repair.

You know how I feel about you.

His words, his voice make her eye throb with dry tears. Her fingers tighten around the glass jar.

"Nancy."

She turns to Steve.

"It'll be alright."

How can he possibly know?

The sun sinks below the horizon and into a deep dusk by the time they arrive at the Byers. The moment Steve pulls up and parks, Nancy dashes out and toward the front door. Chester's barks erupt from the house, and she slows. She presses her ear against the wood.

"What do you mean, *creatures*?" Joyce. "As in plural?"

"Mom, I believe you! Isn't that what you wanted?" Jonathan replies.

"But you're telling me there's more than one crawling around this house? At this very moment?"

"We're going to prove it to you. Once Nancy and Steve get here, you'll see, okay? Then we can go get some help."

Nancy pulls back and raps her knuckles against the door. Chester's barking dies down, and after another beat, the door opens wide, and Jonathan sighs with relief in seeing her and Steve. "Cavalry's here," the latter says, holding up the hand lamp.

"Happy for some reinforcements." A paper bag dangles from Jonathan's wrist. From it, he produces a red bulb and tosses it over. "Hope it fits."

After unscrewing the standard bulb, he snaps and twists the other one in. "Like a charm." Remembering his manners, he nods to Joyce. "Mrs. Byers."

"I can't believe this," she says, putting a hand to her forehead.

"I hope you don't mind," Nancy says, stepping over the threshold.

Joyce's hand drops to massage the bridge of her nose with a pinch of her fingers. "Yeah, come on in. Why not? This is the very least of my concerns, believe me."

"Then let's see if we're right," Jonathan says. "Okay, Mom?"

She nods. Nancy places a reassuring hand on her back, which Joyce returns with a shallow smile of gratitude. "Okay," she says. Nancy cannot explain it, but it is uncanny how Joyce inspires not just sympathy, but the desire to rally beside her.

A fit of labored coughing comes from down the hall. Their attention snaps to Will, approaching them in his pyjamas. Nancy frowns, for he looks rather pale and sickly.

"What's going on?" he asks once the fit subsides.

Joyce goes to him, saying, "I'm so sorry, dear. We were too loud."

"Why are they here?" Will glances between Nancy and Steve.

"We're, um-," Jonathan starts.

"Just a school project," Nancy offers.

"Come on, I'm not that stupid," Will says.

"Just go back to bed, honey," Joyce says, brushing bangs out of his eyes.

Will recoils from her. He says, "You're looking for them, right?"

"What?"

"The slugs."

"How on earth do you know that?" Joyce demands.

Will's gaze falls to the floor.

"Mom, he heard us," Jonathan says. He comes to crouch before Will.

"Have you seen them, too?"

He nods. Joyce's hand flies to her mouth in horror. "Where?" she asks through her fingers. "When? How long have you been seeing them?"

Will stays silent.

"Nevermind. It doesn't matter. Let's just plug this in and just...see what we see," Jonathan says, rising. To Steve, he says, "Do you mind?" He points to an outlet. "I'm going to hit the lights."

"Yeah, no problem."

One by one, the lights blink out throughout the house. With only a trickle of dusky sunlight available, Nancy can almost sense them, but only just out of the corner of her eyes. The silence unnerves her, even beyond the pregnant moments after she and Jonathan drew blood from their hands in this very place. The hand lamp wobbles in Steve's unsteady grip.

"Everyone ready?" Steve asks once Jonathan returns. At everyone's silent nods of consent, he plugs in the lamp. The switch clicks, and the lamp bathes the living room in a sanguine light.

Joyce can hardly contain a shriek. She stumbles backward, pulling Will with her.

Neither can Nancy contain hers, once her eyes adjust. Their theory proves true as long, fat slugs, and black as night, slide about the ceilings, across the carpet, and over furniture. Nancy counts at least half a dozen in the living room, with more inching and writhing along the hallway as Steve rotates the lamp across the grotesque scene.

"Holy Christ," he says.

Fear keeps them rooted in place, like statutes in Medusa's stare, and Nancy hopes Steve might turn the lamp off. Jonathan, however, is the first to take a brave step forward.

"Nancy," he whispers, beckoning for the jar in her hand. She pops off the lid gives it over, and he extracts from his pocket the tongs he pilfered from the dark room. With delicate movements, he approaches one moving along the carpet, as though gliding over a bed of moss.

"Be careful!" Nancy hisses. She glances over to Joyce, who has thrown her arms around a strangely unperturbed Will.

Jonathan reaches for the creature with the tongs. He first prods the creature's soft, mucous-covered body, and garners little reaction. Yet, when Jonathan squeezes the tongs around its tail, the slug jumps and twists in violent spasms. He yelps in surprise, dropping the tongs and the creature with them. Then, to Nancy's infinite disgust and horror, the slug slithers down the hall at great speed. Its comrades join the race, and more yet unaccounted for shoot out from under chairs and behind shelves.

"Ugh," Steve mumbles, turning away. His cheeks bulge and he stoops, swallowing back the contents of his stomach.

"I got it, man." Jonathan trades Nancy the jar back so he can gently pry the lamp from Steve. Steve nods, bringing his fist to his lips. They leave him behind to recover as they advance down the hall and in the wake of and the great rush of creatures. Jonathan holds the lamp high. With her empty hand, Nancy reaches out, taking him by the wrist as he leads them forward.

"Jonathan!" his mother hisses, pleading. She is shaking with fear, but he glances back to reassure her with a nod of his head.

The stream of slugs flood into the bathroom, where they slither up the commode and clamor underneath the lid, finding their exodus underneath. The haste of their retreat causes water to slosh and splash out in the exact way it did the night before. She cannot distinguish whether the insanity looped back in on itself as to seem everyday, or her brain was incapable of full comprehension of what they beheld, but she finds it easy to hold herself together.

"We still need to grab one," she whispers. The steady coolness of her own voice sounds so surreal compared with her racing thoughts. Like her, however, he remains frozen, fascinated like she is by the spectacle unfolding around them, in front of them, and under their feet. Her grip on his wrist falls to his hand, and squeezes, bolstering the magnetic attraction with him she's come to depend on for her bearings. In that moment, he's the only thing keeping her anchored in the present reality.

The last of the slugs rush in and disappear beneath the lid. Footsteps stumble towards them, and she and Jonathan turn to see Steve, coming to brace himself against the door frame. Nancy pulls back her hand.

"I'm sorry, but that was utterly disgusting," Steve says. "Way worse than last time."

Jonathan says, "Wuss." He twists in order to flip on the bathroom light, then switches off the lamp.

"Shut up. You catch one?"

Jonathan looks to Nancy, who holds up her empty jar. "No," she says.

“We were pretty freaked out, too.”

It's then that Joyce and Will shuffle into view behind Steve, who steps to the side. Nodding to the commode, Joyce says, “Is-, is that where they're coming from?”

“Maybe. Probably,” Jonathan says.

Joyce's jaw tightens. Then, she bolts.

“Mom!” Jonathan calls. But she returns swiftly, with a roll of duct tape in hand. “Wait. That's our only toilet.”

“I don't care,” Joyce hisses, splashing in the pool of water around the toilet as she drops to her knees next to it. She rips and tears off a strip to wrap over the lid. Then again, and again, until the lid is thoroughly sealed and reinforced.

“Mom. Jonathan.”

All eyes train upon Will. He says, “They're not coming from there. That's just where they hide.”

“What? How do you know?” Joyce says.

“Because I know where they're coming from.”

“Where?” Jonathan rushes to him, placing his free hand on his brother's shoulder.

“I'm sorry,” he replies, tears welling up in his eyes. Then, another violent bout of coughing erupts from him. He is overcome, bending forward from the force of his convulsions. His coughing converts to hacking, sounding as though something is lodged in his throat. Specks of blood fly and spatter the floor, and Jonathan leaps back from him.

“Oh my God,” Jonathan says. “We need to call 911!”

“Wait!” Nancy says, raising her hand. A dreadful suspicion draws her forward to Will, and she holds out the jar. “Jonathan,” she says. “The light.”

“What?”

“The light!” she repeats, looking to the lamp in his hand.

Immediately he fumbles with the lamp switch, while Steve reaches to shut off the bathroom light. After a second of complete darkness, the lamp bursts with blood-red light. Nancy fixes on Will, and her fears manifest when she spots the head of a black slug, fighting its way out of Will’s throat. The boy continues to cough and heave. She kneels, opening the jar lid and holding its opening underneath the struggling creature.

“Will! *Will!*” Joyce shrieks, her cheeks running with tears. Jonathan wraps his arm around her shoulders as they look on with horror. After an excruciating minute of effort, the slug makes its way past Will’s lips and plops inside the container. In the next instant, Nancy throws on the lid and twists it shut. For good measure, she snatches the roll of duct tape from Joyce and wraps the seal up tight. She tries not to drop the jar when the slug thumps and rattles against its cage.

“We got one at least,” Nancy breathes.

Joyce rushes to Will, throwing her arms around him. Tears continue to roll down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Will repeats.

“It’s okay. I promise, It’s going to be okay now, honey,” Joyce says, pulling back to stroke a finger through his hair.

The five of them regroup around the dining table, after having turned on all available normal lighting in the house. The empty-but-not-empty jar sits before them. Though it appears empty, the container wobbles as sole evidence of the creature within.

Nancy says, “Time to call the Chief, right?”

“In a minute,” Jonathan says. He hands the lamp over to Steve, then drops to embrace his brother. Will, for his part, accepts it as though a

ragdoll, listless and blank.

"How long?" Jonathan asks him.

"Since I got back from the hospital. I was scared. I thought it would stop eventually."

Jonathan pulls back to look at him, nodding as though he expected as much. "Can you tell us anything else?"

"I can see them. Like right now. I see it in the jar."

"Even though we don't?"

Will nods. His face falls.

Jonathan pats him on the shoulder. "It's okay. We'll figure this out." Nancy knows how hard he is fighting against showing his true fears, and it tortures her.

"Come on, hon," Joyce says to Will, taking him by the hand. "You look tired. Let's get you to bed, then I'll call Hop. Can you see them out, hon?"

"Of course," Jonathan says.

Will nods, and with the gait of a zombie, he accompanies his mother out, leaving the three teenagers alone with the captured slug. The glass clatters again against the wooden tabletop.

Jonathan says, "Appreciate the help with this, guys. I'll let you know what comes of it."

"You're not going to go to the press with this? The government?" Steve says.

In unison, Nancy and Jonathan say, "No."

"Why not? What if this is happening elsewhere?"

"We-," Nancy starts.

"We don't trust them. Anyone in authority, except the Chief,"

Jonathan says.

"Okay, geez," Steve says. "I'm sorry, it's just I think I've had enough of this spooky shit to last me a lifetime."

A pang of nausea rolls over Nancy, and she notices the telling pause before Jonathan replies, "I don't blame you. You guys get home. I've got it from here."

"Come on, Nancy," Steve says, heaving a sigh. "Let's go home."

Nancy tenses. "No."

"No?" Steve repeats.

She turns, and standing next to Jonathan she says, "I'd like to stay for a while. If that's okay."

Steve reels. "Why? We're done here, right?"

Nancy doesn't reply. Steve's attention darts to Jonathan. The latter shrugs.

"Nancy, why?" Steve tries again.

"No, we're not done here. *I'm* not done here. I just want to stay, alright? I'm worried about Mrs. Byers, and about Will, and..." she trails off as she glances to Jonathan. She counts on his support.

He does not disappoint her. "I can take her home," he says.

Steve goes back to Nancy, his expression lost, and pleading. "You really want to stay? What if those things are crawling all over you right now? I'm scared for you, Nancy. Let's just let him handle things from here. You know he can."

"That's not the-," she halts. "It's fine, Steve. I'm not going anywhere. I'll call you," she reassures him.

At that, Steve grows severe. "Unbelievable." He hurls the lamp onto the table, and turns to leave.

"Steve!"

"No, I get it. And don't worry about it. I'll just see you tomorrow. I hope," he says.

The front door slams. Somewhere in the house, Chester starts barking. After a moment, she can just make out the rumble of Steve's car engine turning over. She grinds her teeth.

Jonathan asks, "What was that about?"

She crosses her arms. "I'm so annoyed, I can't even think straight right now."

"Okay."

"Trust me, Jonathan. I'd much rather be here."

With a twitch of his lips and a nod, he accepts her statement, then makes for the kitchen. "You want anything to drink?"

Her throat does feel dry. "Anything besides tap water?"

"Shit, good point." He goes to the fridge, and dips down to shuffle around various items. He produces a bottle of Sunny Delight. "It's all we have right now, unless you want what's left of the milk. I doubt Mom will care."

"Perfect."

He fetches down two glasses. He pours one for each of them, then brings them to the table. They sit adjacent to one another, settling into a comfortable lull as they sip. The jar rattles again.

"You're not going to stay here, are you?" she asks.

He shrugs. "Where else would I go?"

"No. Not with these things crawling about," Nancy says, shaking her head. "You can't use your toilet, either."

"We'll just keep the lights on. And there's plenty of woods here to do

business.”

“In the freezing cold?”

“I’m joking. We’ll probably just find a cheap hotel in town, or see if the Chief can put us up somewhere.”

“You seem a little unmoved despite knowing your home is infested.”

“Then what exactly do you suggest?” Jonathan questions her with an expectant look.

Then, as though leaping from cliff, she says, “Stay with me.” She brings the glass to her lips while her heart tumbles and thuds to the bottom of her shoes.

“Nancy,” his eyes sew up tight. “I can’t. And what about Will and Mom?”

“I’ll talk to my mom,” she says. Her hand darts out to cover his. “We have a guest room and a pull-out couch.”

“That’s sweet. Really nice of you. But you know why I can’t,” he says, pulling his hand away. He takes another sip.

She presses her lips together. When she speaks, her voice sounds disembodied to her ears, as if she dreamed it: “Because you love me.”

He coughs and sputters, setting his drink down with a heavy clatter. “Jesus, Nancy.”

“Well?”

He fidgets, then straightens. “You want to talk about this now?”

“Please. I don’t want to keep wondering.”

His focus drifts from her eyes down to her lips. She waits as he wrestles with himself, but only until he tilts his head down, and hides behind his shaggy bangs. Her cheeks burn, but she takes the invitation to place her hands atop his thighs, lean forward, and plant her lips on his forehead.

He lifts his chin, and his shadowy, breathless expression sends a heady jolt of electromagnetism coursing up her spine. Like opposite poles, she is drawn to him.

Until he reels back. Subtle at first, but it's no mistake when he leans back further, out of range of her lips. She's mortified. Her blood ices over, her head throbs, and her expression must be full of questions, for he says, "I'm sorry. I can't."

An eternal second passes. "I thought-..." she begins, but she cannot finish her thought as tears well up in the corners of her eyes.

"It's not that-," he starts. "It's not that I'm not crazy about you. I hated almost everything about my life, until I was so terrified I'd lost you."

She sits back, covering her lips with her fingers. They quiver, and she can't make them stop.

He sighs. "But I just really think that we should wait until after this is all over. That's the honest truth."

"Who are you to tell me what I should do?" she fires back, unable to hold back the rage set upon cauterizing the injury to her pride.

"Just my opinion."

She stands. "I wanted to tell you something earlier," she starts, fighting to steady her own breathing.

"Yeah?"

She wants to confess that something happened to her that night, the night he pulled her out of the tree. That she changed. Everything did. That he was right. She was a suburban girl going on to live out her suburban life, and thought that with the monster gone, that she would carry on with that, as if their time together was all part of the same awful dream. That she was supposed to want her old life, and deny the first time she felt alive. Really alive, as the real person she wanted to be, not a predestined statistic sinking into a life of monotony. Finally, that she met Jonathan, her steadfast reminder of that real person.

That she was going crazy, and liable to act very, very stupid.

But she can't hold it together. She's crumbling. With the last of her resolve, she says, "Forget it. If you're going to be that damned stubborn, then I might as well go home now."

"Then I take it your earlier invitation is void," he says.

She doesn't answer while he rushes by to fetch the car keys off their hook. He blows by her toward the door, and she imagines herself withering under the glacier forming between them.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she follows him out to the car. She shivers the whole way back to her house, even though Jonathan tried to coax out as much heat from the vents as his car could muster. Not another word is exchanged until Jonathan pulls up along the curb at the Wheelers' house.

"I'll let you know, well, whatever comes up," he says.

"Right."

Without looking back, she exits the car and races for the doorstep. She's in her room before she can register climbing the steps she took to arrive there, and the present moment hits her only when her back is pressed against the cold wooden door. She sinks down to the floor, and in futility wipes away the tears which now seem endless.

Notes for the Chapter:

I pretty much wrote out one of my worst nightmares for this chap. Pleasant dreams

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

Woo hoo! Managed to get a new chap out this week. Just FYI, I have some weekend plans but I will be shooting for later next week for the next release. Hope it's still enjoyable. Thank you for the really kind comments and feedback.

“Right.”

The second the car door slams, a chill penetrates him as though Nancy threw a glass of ice water in his face. He's not angry--turnabout is fair play. He froze her out, and hurt her deeply, all because she offered him a joy he had been content only to dream of. Maybe he was wrong. He battles the sudden urge to roll down the window and shout for Nancy to come back before she can reach her front doorstep. He wants - needs - to run to her, stop her, and beg to start everything over.

Yet his hands remain on the steering wheel, his body refusing to act out his imagination. She slips inside the house, and the window of opportunity closes. But after a few sobering moments of silence, he can move his muscles again to shift the gear, and pull off of the curb. Now out of her presence, his impaired rational mind can assert itself.

We were all on-edge, he reasons. The time wasn't right.

Or it's just me, his well-developed pessimism oh-so-helpfully supplies. The moment she sees Steve again, our conversation will surely be chalked up as a lark and then forgotten.

He tries to put his problems out of his mind as well before he makes it home. There are creatures worming their way out of his brother, and that compelling fact trumps all other concerns. He parks the car in the gravel driveway and jogs for the door. As he steps over the threshold at home, he hears his mother's voice carry through the house.

"I need you to come over right away. Yes, like now. Weren't you listening? It's not over, Hop, that's what I'm trying to say..."

Chester trots up to him and nuzzles under his fingertips. After a quick scratch of the ears, Jonathan follows the sound of his mother's voice to the kitchen, passing by the ominous jar still left on the dining table. He stops when a deep, throaty growl erupts from behind him. He turns, seeing Chester stopped as far as the pickle jar, his ears pulled back and his teeth bared. The dog will go no further.

"You know something's there, don't you boy?" Jonathan asks, unsettled by Chester's aggressive posture. He goes over to try and calm Chester with another ear rub, but it does no good when the dog avoids his hand, then finally retreats from the dining room with a deep bark.

Meanwhile, his mother paces the kitchen, with the receiver glued to her ear. "'Tomorrow? *Tomorrow?* I'm telling you there are *things* from that place coming out of my son, there's literally *dozens*, and you can't be bothered until *tomorrow?* But I can prove it! It's sitting right there on my table!" When she spots Jonathan, she stops her pacing.

"H-hang on a second," she says. She mouths, "Hopper."

"I figured," he says. He sees the leftover juice and the two glasses on the counter, having yet to be emptied. He crosses over to return the juice to the fridge, then to wash out the glasses.

"And what about those two paramedics? Still looking into it? Are you kidding me right now? After all we went through last year, you don't see this as a top priority? In fact, I'd say that you don't seem very surprised at all! What is going on, Hop?"

He knits his brow as he runs a sponge over one of the glasses. He respects Hopper, and his willingness to set things right for their family, no matter what hellscape he needed to face. Outside of his mom, Hopper may have been the only other grown adult he trusts. Jonathan is still not sure why Hopper went to the lengths he did, but chalks it up to the Chief just being the kind of person he is. But now, from what he can infer from his mother's side of the conversation, his willingness found a limit. There's no urgency. It doesn't sit right.

"I can't-! You're sorry? Well, thank goodness for that! So you do still have a conscience, but 'sorry' is not good enough. Tomorrow morning I'm coming down to the station myself, you get me? Yeah, I'm done. Done. Goodnight!" His mother stomps back to the cradle and slams the receiver down. "Jackass!"

"What's going on?" Jonathan asks, setting the rinsed glasses aside.

"You'd think he'd be over this very second," she says, holding a palm to her forehead. "But said we should wait to see him at the station tomorrow. He sounded like some braindead bureaucrat, not the Hop I knew last fall."

He opts for the benefit of the doubt. "Maybe he's got his reasons."

She seems to ponder his statement. "Well, I can tell you one thing. We aren't staying here tonight. I don't care if we have to sleep underneath a bridge in some cardboard box."

Anticipating this, he says, "I think I can scrape up some cash to help get us a room. Though maybe not much better than a bridge."

"Oh, honey. I don't want to ask you to do that."

"I don't care, Mom. I want to get away from here, too. Besides," he says, shrugging. "Maybe I'll just bill the Chief when we see him tomorrow."

He's grateful when she smiles at that. She places her hand on Jonathan's ear. Her brow creases. "What a life, huh?" Her arm drops. "I meant to tell you, I'm glad you have such good friends."

Nancy's glassy eyes and upturned lips flash through his mind. He turns away, saying, "Yeah."

According to Will, the Thessalhydra is a reptilian monster, with many heads surrounding a ravenous maw, and has a pincer-tipped tail. Its blood is poison, and its acidic venom can melt anything it comes into contact with. The monster is one of many such beasts created by

Thessalar, a mighty lich. He enjoyed listening to his brother's adventures with the boys, even if he did not entirely understand the rules.

The version of the Hydra Jonathan was more familiar with was that of classical mythology. As he knew it, the goddess Hera created the many-headed serpent, and it guarded a lake that held an entrance to the underworld. Its blood was also toxic, and it could regenerate itself, most notably its heads when cut off. Like many incredible monsters of myth, it is the very embodiment of an insurmountable, hopeless undertaking.

Yet their story also shows that some struggles demand a measure of cleverness rather than sheer strength. The challenge of slaying the Hydra befell the half-god Heracles for his second labor, and defeated its regenerative properties by burning the severed necks, then by removing and burying the last head. His heroic deed also demonstrates that even a hopeless task may have a solution.

That, or that it takes someone who is superhuman to rid the world of monsters.

There's a two-story motel just inside a mile from the highway, and the lone island of affordable shelter in all of Hawkins. It rests at the end of a dark, dirt road cut through the forest. The guiding light of the building's weathered *24HR VACANCY* sign flicker and buzz. The place existed for longer than Jonathan has been alive in Hawkins, and he's convinced its signs and outward appearance have not changed - or even been washed - since it was established. Portals to another dimension notwithstanding, he's grateful that Hawkins otherwise holds nothing special for visitors, especially during the winter. The dearth of regular business makes the price of a single room easier to negotiate.

Equally important was the lack of a defined pet policy. As Jonathan returns to the car with the room key, he hears Chester whine in the back seat. In the back seat with him, Will reaches out strokes his neck.

“Kind of a seedy place, isn’t it?” his mother says from her seat in shotgun. “Castle Byers seems like a resort in comparison.”

Jonathan replies, “You get what you pay for.”

They find their room and he begins the haul of his family’s luggage while his mother takes Chester. He tries not to think about the sagging tiles, faded wallpaper, and carpet infused with the stench of cigarettes. He flinches, however, when a shadowy speck in the corner of his eye darts up along the wall just outside the door. But he calms immediately, thinking that he’s never been more grateful to see a cockroach in his life.

“Mom,” Will says. “Where will I sleep?”

“On the bed with me,” she says.

“What about Jonathan?”

“That’s why I brought the sleeping bag,” Jonathan answers. After setting aside the suitcases, he dashes out to the car to fetch that very thing from the trunk.

The jar, too. He fits the sleeping bag roll under his arm, then squeezes into the back seat to grab the spare shoebox they threw the jar in, along with ample padding.

As Jonathan returns with his load, Will asks, “What if another one comes out of me?”

He sets the sleeping bag aside and sets the shoebox on the nightstand, then shrugs when his mother glances up to him for help. “I’m not sure, sweetie,” she says. “How often do they, well, come out?”

“Everyday,” Will says.

“Jesus,” she sighs. “Okay. Well, just tell us when it’s happening, and we’ll hopefully have figured something out by then.”

He then makes another run out to the car where, in the trunk, he finds Will’s walkie-talkies. Underneath them, however, is Steve’s hand lamp. He pushes aside the walkies and grasps the lamp’s

handle. His pulse quickens. Darting back into the room, he finds a free outlet, plugs it in, and switches on the red light. He cracks open the shoebox and peers inside.

“Still there,” he says, more to himself than to his family. The worm is sedate, but still pulses with life. He switches off the lamp and closes the shoebox.

He finishes retrieving the rest of any odds and ends from the car, including the walkies, then joins his family in putting away clothes and toiletries. The task does not hold Will’s interest for long, preferring to fiddle with the small black-and-white television resting on a stand across from the bed.

“It doesn’t work,” Will finally says, defeated by the set’s relentless snow and static. “Mom, can I go get a soda?”

“This isn’t a vacation, Will. I don’t want you going out there. Besides, I don’t have any spare change at the moment,” she answers.

Jonathan reaches into his pocket. “I’ve got some. I can go with him. We need to take Chester out, anyway.”

Will rewards him with a shallow smile, perhaps the first since yesterday. His mother, on the other hands, sighs and folds her arms. She gives Chester a side-eye when the latter starts to wag his tail.

“Okay. Just don’t stay out too long. It’s cold out.”

After leashing Chester, Jonathan and his brother head out. They pass by the long row of doors towards the front office and the vending machines, and Jonathan allows Chester to run ahead on his leash. Though he snuffles close to the ground, there’s not much holding the dog’s interest; the motel is silent, and seemingly devoid of any other human life. Jonathan absent-mindedly thumbs the change in his pocket, glancing over to Will to ensure he kept pace.

“Did you remember the walkie-talkies?” Will asks.

“I brought them in,” Jonathan reassures him.

“Good, ‘cause I need to let Mike and the guys know where I am.”

Jonathan thinks about this, for it crosses his mind to inform Nancy of their temporary arrangement, too. As a courtesy, of course. Nothing more.

“Hey, Will.”

“Yeah?”

“I should let Nancy know, too. You think Mike would mind?”

A wide grin crosses Will’s pale face, and the degree of it almost makes Jonathan stagger. His discomfort worsens when Will says, “He won’t mind at all. I owe you one for the soda, anyway. Dustin and Lucas, on the other hand...”

“Oh, right,” Jonathan says. “Nevermind, then.”

“No, no! You can just use a different frequency. We won’t listen in, I promise!”

Jonathan chuckles, yet as his brother finishes, the latter brings a fist to his lips and coughs. Panicking, Jonathan stops short, and he tugs Chester back. “Oh, *shit*. God-! I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” Will says, his cough subsiding quickly. “Not this time.”

His brother’s reassurance allows Jonathan to breathe again. Though he is not completely convinced, they resume their stride, with Chester zig-zagging ahead once more.

They return with 70 cents worth of soft drink-- one can for each of them. In a final test of their mother’s limits, they’re allowed to enjoy them while seated on the trunk of the car, with only the dim sconces of the motel walkways and flickering neon signage for light. The stars, at least, are bright and numerous.

As Jonathan promised him, Will has his walkie-talkie in hand. The latter depresses the talk button, and says, “Mike. If you’re there,

come in. Over.”

They sip their fizzy drinks and listen for a response. After a few ticks of radio silence, “Mike. It’s Will. Come in, over.”

“Just answer him already, over,” comes a reply. Lucas. “It’s late.”

The handset crackles. Finally, Mike speaks. “Mike here, over.”

“Mike, it’s Will. Um, I just wanted to let you guys know that I’m not at home right now. I’ll be at the old motel for a while.”

“Oh my god.” Dustin’s voice joins them. “Not *that* old motel? The creepiest place in Indiana? I heard someone got murdered there last winter! Uh, over.”

“Why are you there?” Mike asks.

“Um,” Will starts. He glances over to Jonathan.

Mike says, “Will? You okay?”

Will continues to stall, so Jonathan takes the handset from him and replies, “We’re having some plumbing issues at our house. Hope to be back home soon. Over.”

“Is that Jonathan?” Mike says.

Will takes the walkie back. He says, “Yeah. Hey, Dustin? Lucas? Let me talk to Mike for a sec, would you? Over.”

“Like, in private?” Lucas asks. “Because now I really want to listen in, over.”

“Me too, over,” Dustin says.

“Guys, come on,” Will pleads.

Jonathan sighs, irritated at his struggle with his friends. So he snatches back the walkie and says, “Mike. Jonathan again. Is Nancy still up?” He could endure a little embarrassment in order to take the heat off of his brother.

As expected, the walkie erupts. The crossed signals generate heavy static, but he distinctly hears Dustin gush, “Guys, you hear that?”

Mike’s voice then cuts through the interference. “Um, yeah. I think so. I can check.”

“Thanks,” Jonathan answers, but he’s unsure if it got through. He glances over to Will, who is staring at him. “What?”

“Jonathan,” Dustin blurts from the walkie. “Are you and Nancy...you know? Over.”

He puts the walkie to his lips. “None of your business, over.”

“Aww, man. Over,” Lucas adds.

Then, Mike says, and with barely disguised amusement: “She’s here, but I think she’s pissed. You still want to talk to her?”

Lucas *oohs*, followed by a giggle.

“Yeah, if she doesn’t mind,” Jonathan says. “I’ll only be a few minutes. And guys? Some courtesy, please.”

“Okay, okay, we’ll sign off,” Dustin relents. “Doesn’t mean we won’t still pump Will for details.”

Will depresses the walkie button and leans over to reply, “Be my guest!”

“Okay, Jonathan, she’s right here,” Mike says.

His hands tremble as he fingers the talk button. He swallows the lump in his throat. He glances over to Will. Will grins at him, then hoists himself down off of the trunk, and darts back to the motel room with his soda.

He’s startled when Nancy’s annoyed voice erupts from the handset. “Jonathan? Are you actually there or is this one of Mike’s stupid pranks?”

Finally, he presses the button. “I’m here.”

“What do you want? It’s late. And since when are you ten-years-old? Why can’t you just use the phone during the day?”

He winces. “I just wanted to let you know we’re at the motel just off the highway.”

There is no response for a moment. Then, “That rat warren? On the dirt path?”

“Yep, that’s the one. Room 26.”

“You have gotten your tetanus shot, right?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Alright. Thanks for letting me know.”

He clenches the handset in his palm, his fingers growing sweaty despite the chill in the air. “Sorry for bothering you like this. Goodnight.”

He takes his finger off of the button, throwing his head back. *Such an idiot*, he berates himself. Another thick swallow, and he blinks away the beginnings of tears.

“Jonathan?”

His attention shoots back to the walkie.

“You still there?” she asks.

Inexplicably, he debates with himself whether to respond, and just let her believe he’s gone to bed. But the moment she mumbles out the word *goodnight*, he scrambles to push the talk button.

“I’m here,” he says. Another uncomfortable silence passes.

“Why don’t-”

“No, you-”

Both of their voices collide at once.

Huffing, Jonathan says, “Nancy.”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m sorry I was a prick. You were trying to let me know how you feel, and I shut you down. I just can’t stop being an asshole sometimes, and I get it if that means you don’t want to speak to me anymore.”

Something in his chest loosens, and he feels a little lighter. But he awaits her response in agonizing suspense as seconds tick by.

Finally, “No, Jonathan. We’re still friends, okay? I couldn’t see it at the time, but you were right. I’m glad you had the presence of mind to stop me before I did something stupid.”

He’s not sure what she means by that, and it discourages him. But she then says, “Listen, would you just call me? Or does your room not have a working phone?”

“Won’t that disturb your parents?”

“They’re still up. It’s fine.”

Jonathan’s hand dives into his pocket. He prays he still has an extra dime. “There’s a payphone by the office. I hope it works, and doesn’t give me hepatitis.”

Then, as if by a miracle, his fingers run over the ridges of the coin he needs. “Give me a sec,” he tells her. With the walkie in hand, he jogs briskly back over to the office. Its lone payphone stands within its half-moon shelter just outside, gummy and graffitied to hell. “I’m about to dial,” he informs her, then shoves the walkie into his waistband. He covers his hand with his sleeve, inserts the quarter, and picks up the receiver. His mouth dries as he dials the Wheelers’ number.

Not even a millisecond passes before the call connects. “Hey,” she says.

“That was my last dime,” Jonathan says.

"Then I'll make this quick." She breathes out, measured and slow. Then, "I like you, Jonathan."

Blood rushes from his temples. "It's mutual," he says.

"I know." Her voice slices through him when she then adds, "But I also like Steve, for different reasons."

"Oh." He resists the urge to be petty, saying, "He's a good guy, even if he is a little hotheaded."

"And so are you, even when you push people away."

Her statement provokes a flare of indignation. "What did you expect me to do? I just learned my brother is barfing up whatever those things are."

"I know, I know. That's why you were right. I get it. But I just thought you should know how conflicted I am."

He turns this over in his mind, and his irritation recedes. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I feel like I've got feet between two worlds." She chuckles. "Like here and the Upside Down."

He can't help but tease. "Oh? And which one am I?"

"I plead the fifth."

He huffs with amusement, but then grows severe. He says, "I think I might have an idea for how to clear things up."

"Oh?"

"Mom and I are going to see the Chief tomorrow morning with our cargo. Now, if you want to stay at school, and carry on your day with Steve, I totally get it. Then that's probably your true feelings."

"I see. But if I come support you..."

"Then," he can't stop his heart from racing. "Then those are probably

your true feelings. Maybe not written in stone, but...-

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“That’s fair. It’s selfish of me to drag this out with everything else going on, isn’t it?”

He can’t disagree. “Can’t say I envy your position. But Nancy?”

“Yeah?”

“For the record, I hope you’ll be there.”

“You’ll know my decision tomorrow.”

“I’m just about out of time. Have a goodnight, Nancy.”

“Goodnight, Jonathan.”

Click. He pulls the dead receiver from his ear, frowning before hooking it back onto the cradle.

A strange shiver races down his spine. Then, an engine starts somewhere behind him. He spins to glance over his shoulder, and spots a van stopped just before the dirt road expands into the motel’s parking lot. When Jonathan turns fully, its headlights flash on, then pulls a U-turn away from the motel. In the low light, he can just make out the markings on the side: *HAWKINS WASTEWATER UTILITY*.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am trying to be mindful of any anachronisms. Feel free to let me know if I’ve got something wrong

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally! Sorry about the wait for this next installment. Some weeks work out better than others for sitting down to write. I appreciate the patience.

“Nancy! Time to get up! Breakfast is getting cold!”

Nancy wakes with a start at her mother’s voice. The phone rattles when her stray hand collides with it on the bed beside her. Her bleary eyes catch the outline of her brother’s walkie-talkie resting next the phone. She throws her head back against the pillow when memories of the night before flood back into her mind. Her tired muscles protest any further movement.

“Nancy?” her mother calls again.

She blinks, clearing away the fog, and grinds out, “Be right there.” She rolls her head toward her window. The dawn has yet to break.

Downstairs at the breakfast table, a plate of hard-cooked eggs and a slice of buttered toast await her. With a fork, she stabs at an egg. Its soft, pale flesh splits, and its yellow interior crumbles. Placing even the smallest morsel her mouth makes her stomach turn. She attempts the same with a crumb of toast, with the same result.

“Honey? What’s wrong?” her mother asks from the kitchen, running a clean rag over the countertop.

Nancy confesses, “I didn’t sleep so well last night.” She doesn’t remember when her restless mind finally gave out, but the respite seemed to last only a few seconds before her mother’s call to breakfast.

Her mother pauses her sweeping motions, leaving the rag where it is. She goes over to Nancy, and places the back of her palm against Nancy’s forehead.

“Mom,” Nancy says, pulling away from her icy knuckles.

“Are you feeling sick?” her mother asks.

Yes. As her stomach flips for the thousandth time, she considers the option of staying home entirely. When she got off the phone with Jonathan, she believed she could do this. Now, she wonders where her faith disappeared. The tightness in her chest worsens when she thinks about the consequences of either ditching Steve, or abandoning Jonathan during a difficult time. She knows it’s not the best way to think about her options, but her guilt shows no sign of receding. It overwhelms any shred of optimism that dares rise to the surface.

However, when she thinks about refusing to make a decision at all, the tightness doubles. The pain is blinding. She may be able to weather the disappointment of either Steve or Jonathan, but not both. *There’s no way back.*

“Nancy?” her mother prods again.

“No, Mom. I’ll be okay,” Nancy replies. She reaches for her glass of orange juice and sips on it, hoping to convince her mother. Though her brow is knit, her mother backs away to the kitchen, and resumes cleaning. Nancy then adds, “I’m thinking I’ll ride my bike to school today, though.”

“What? In this freezing weather?” her mother says.

“I don’t feel like taking the bus. The roads must be dry by now, and I got that new scarf and jacket for Christmas, after all. I’ll be fine.”

Her mother sighs. “Is that why you look so glum? It’s okay if you don’t want to ride the bus, Nancy, you can just tell me. Alright, but you better hurry up and finish if you want to make it on time.”

“Thanks, Mom.” More guilt heaps upon her as she allows her mother to believe this fiction, and for the sake of convenience. It’s a slip backward into an old habit-- another convenience.

After a prompt clean-up, Nancy bundles herself and throws on her book bag. The sky glows a deathly blue near the horizon by the time she goes around to the back of the house to retrieve her bike from

storage. The air is cold-- piercing cold. Nonetheless, she tolerates the discomfort as it dulls her pangs of dread, and clears her mind if only briefly. Her teeth chatter as she tows her bike up the driveway.

She stops when she hears her name.

“Nancy! Wait up!”

She turns to see Mike, backpack clamoring against him as he rushes toward her.

“You’re taking your bike?” he says, puzzled.

A puff of frost blows past her lips. “So what?”

He does not care to answer, and instead blows by saying, “Listen, can I walk with you for a second?”

Nancy blinks, then shrugs in assent. The bike chain clicks as she pushes it forward, following Mike onto the street. “And I assume you want to talk as well?”

“Yeah.” He waits for her to catch up. “You were there last night, weren’t you? At the Byers’.”

“So?”

“Why?”

Nancy huffs, and another stream of frosted breath billows out. “If this is about Jonathan again, I don’t want to talk about-,”

“No, it’s about Will. Do you know what’s going on with him? Why is he really at that motel?”

Once again, and within a short period, she’s impressed with how perceptive Mike could be. Her silence, however, gives her away. He crosses in front of her bike and stops her.

“You know something, don’t you?” he says.

“Mike...” she starts, unsure of just how to finish. She still struggles to

process the reality of it herself, and with the limited explanation she has.

“Tell me!” he shouts.

“Will’s still sick, okay?” she blurts. Memories of the black creature surging out of Will’s throat flash through her mind. “Really sick.”

His expression falls, and he nods. He steps aside, and they resume their pace. “Shit. I hoped not.”

“The Byers are working really hard to get him better, though.”

“That doesn’t answer why they’re at the motel. Jonathan said they had a plumbing issue, but I don’t buy it.”

Nancy repeats her mistake of declining to respond. Her throat betrays her by closing over anything and everything she wanted to say. Mike notices, and asks the question she dreads: “Is it the Upside Down?”

She lowers her chin, and picks up her pace. “I think it’s best that you don’t see Will until I tell you it’s okay. And don’t tell anyone else.”

“Why? What is going on? Come on, Nancy. Nancy!”

She ignores him, and after a running start, she hops up onto her bike. She can hear Mike’s rapid footsteps as he gives chase. “Nancy!”

Over her shoulder, she says, “I’m sorry. Remember what I said!”

He gives up his pursuit. Her eyes sting when he growls his disappointment and frustration at her back. She puts nearly all of her weight into cycling back and forth on the pedals, her entire body feeling like worthless, dead weight.

She arrives at Jonathan’s locker, carrying nothing but her book bag and a vague memory of exactly how she got there. She stares at its padlock, and wonders if he is at the police station already with his

family, forced to be responsible while saddled with a crushing loneliness and fear for his brother. Clusters of students brush past her on the way to homeroom, but she stands unmoved like a boulder in a gushing stream.

“There you are.”

She only moves her head slightly towards the voice. “Hey, Steve.”

“Listen, I-...whoa, hey. You don’t look so good,” Steve says, stooping to get a good look at her face.

It’s on the tip of her tongue, but she can’t bring herself to tell him about the decision weighing on her mind. *Why did she find it so hard?* As she searches Steve’s blissfully unaware expression, she says, “I’m sorry.” She doesn’t intend it, but her eyes water.

“Hey, hey!” he says, pulling her against his chest. She leans into it. He vibrates pleasantly against her ear when he says, “If you mean about yesterday, you have nothing to be sorry for. All forgotten about. I’m an ass sometimes when I get freaked out. I should have called you.”

She smiles. “Yeah, you are, and you should have. But that was legitimately freaky.”

He pulls away from her to say, “Exactly! I’m still hoping it was just a nightmare.”

“It wasn’t. Just like last time wasn’t.”

“Yeah. I’m amazed you still had any desire to face it again.”

“Well, you came around, too. Thanks for being there.”

“So I’m off the hook then, too, right?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should apologize to Jonathan, too.”

He shoots a look over to Jonathan’s locker. “Doubt the poor guy’s going to be in today.”

She sighs, her eyes falling to the floor. “He won’t. He said he was going to the police station this morning.”

At that, Steve’s brow quirks. “So what happened between you two? Is he the reason you look like hell today? Don’t tell me...” he blanches.

She looks up sharply. “No, Steve. Nothing happened. I just made sure he was going to be okay, then he took me straight home. Your tantrum was way out of proportion.”

Steve brings a hand to the back of his head. “Now I really feel like an ass, but I’m glad you always have your heart in the right place.” He strokes her hair. “It’s always been what I like about you.”

She winces, humbled by Steve’s sincere words. She tries to mask it by adjusting her scarf around her chin. “Thanks.”

He smiles. “Say, you want to skip and go get waffles?”

Her appetite comes roaring back out of its dead sleep. “At the diner?” she says.

“Yeah, with the mile-high whipped cream. Come on, my treat.” With an impish grin, nods towards the exit down the hall, and seizes her wrist to drag her towards it. Despite herself, she gives in. She laughs as Steve tugs her into a run for the exit, bypassing a gauntlet of strange looks and questioning eyebrows. Yet there exists only the two of them, and his uncanny ability to make her forget her troubles. The heaviness in her bones lightens as they fly down the hall. *He wasn’t a bad choice.*

Jonathan could handle himself. He could forgive her.

Strips of sunlight filter between the bare branches of forest lining the main drag of towards downtown Hawkins. Along the stretch of two-lane road stands the Hawkins Family Diner, one of few revered institutions in Hawkins, right after church on Sunday. Pilgrimages to breakfast are a regular custom, and Nancy’s stomach growls the entire time it takes to arrive. Once there, the smell of fresh coffee,

sweet pastries, and frying grease make her stomach fold in on itself.

The host leads them to a booth next to a wide open window, with a view of the sporadic instances of cars, and the occasional bus flying up and down the strip. On the way, Nancy notices an officer seated at the diner bar, engrossed in the day's paper and squeezing in a bite and a cup of coffee before duty. His presence reminds her that the police station is only few minutes drive. She pushes it out of her mind.

"Two orders of waffles," Steve tells the waitress before she can set menus down. "And OJ."

The name tag under her lapel declares her as *DORIS*. Doris slowly takes the menus back, and with a cold glare at the both of them, she says in a grizzled, raspy voice, "I didn't know school was out today."

"We don't need a babysitter," Steve fires back. "We're paying customers, okay?"

A wry smirk crosses her. "Listen, kid. Don't make me bother that officer over there in the middle of his breakfast."

"Don't, Steve," she hisses, silencing him before he can say another word. To Doris, she says, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I've been really anxious about college applications and my grades lately, and he's just trying to cheer me up. This is really all my fault. But if you have to report us, I understand."

Steve gapes at her statement. However, she knows she has wagered correctly when Doris clicks her tongue, whips out her order pad and says, "Alright, dear. Two waffles and OJs. Anything else?"

"With whipped cream, and a cherry for each," Steve says.

"Thank you," Nancy says to Doris, smiling, but not too broadly. "I'm grateful for your kindness." Doris rolls her eyes as she scratches down the order.

As soon as she leaves their table, Steve leans forward. His eyes twinkle with naked awe. "So devious. No one can resist you."

Nancy smiles as she places her napkin on her lap. "Wonder who I learned it from."

Steve sits back. "Oh, shit. Now there's a compliment."

"Don't let it go to your head. I don't think your hair can take much more."

Steve rolls his eyes. "Hey, now. Who's the one here buying you waffles?"

"If you think you can buy my silence, then you don't know me," she asserts. She meant it facetiously, but when Steve confronts her with a dour look, she reconsiders her angle. "What?" she prods.

"I've been wanting to tell you something."

"What's that?"

"You really changed after that week."

It's an ominous statement, like dark clouds forming off in the distance. Due to her lingering fatigue, and perhaps some morbid curiosity, she recklessly charges ahead: "Did I? How so?"

"Yeah. I don't think the old Nancy would have the nerve to say what you said just now."

"To you, or to-," Nancy holds back for the few seconds it takes for Doris to float by and drop off their orange juice. Once Doris leaves again, Nancy finishes, "Or to her? Are you saying I'm rude?"

"Both. And more like you stopped caring what other people think. If this is the real you, then I think I'm getting used to it."

"Getting used to it," Nancy repeats. Her shoulders tighten, and she grinds her knuckles against her palm in her lap.

"Wait, don't take it the wrong way. I just remember you being so cute and easygoing when we met. And how cool it was when you shotgunned a beer with me. Among other things we did. I mean, you're still cute, but-,"

“Is this really you trying to cheer me up?”

With a shaky hand, he sips his orange juice, then says, “I didn’t mean to upset you. Just making an observation.”

“Why are you saying all this now?”

He throws his hand up. “You know what? I don’t know. Nevermind. This is all coming out all wrong. Let’s talk about something else, okay?”

Fat chance. “No. You started this, so let me tell you something, Steve. You’re right. I did change. I don’t give a shit what people think anymore. You want to take a wild guess who I learned *that* from?”

He’s stunned, and she meets his flustered glare, daring him to say another word. He grunts in defeat and disengages, averting his eyes out the window, and they sit in silence for what seems like an interminable length. Her ire cools only when Doris returns and drops off their plates of waffles with heavy clangs.

Two thick, golden waffles sit on top of one another, buried under an avalanche of whipped cream, with a bright red cherry perched on top. They look magnificent, and smell like magic. “Thanks,” Nancy mumbles. Yet the very instant Nancy picks up her fork, her voracious appetite vanishes.

“Listen. You win. Let’s just forget about this for now, okay?” Steve says, his attention now drawn to his plate. He rips his fork from its napkin cocoon. “I’m starving.”

She nods, but already he’s applying a quick drizzle of table syrup, and cannot hold himself back as he tears into his first bite. The single-minded violence of his attack broadcasts quite plainly that he’s seething. She picks up her fork, and dabs it into a swirl of cream, and touches it to her tongue. Her stomach lurches.

“C’mon, Nancy,” Steve says over a mouthful. “No time t’ be all proper. It’s waffles!”

She puts up another valiant effort against her meal, slicing away a triangle of waffle with the edge of her fork. But the moment she

places the piece to her lips, the sickeningly sweet aroma repulses her. The utensil clatters against her plate as she rips it away from her before she can heave.

Steve stuffs in and gulps down a large bite. But just like that, his feasting stops as rapidly as it began.

She pushes the plate away, swallowing down her nausea. "I'm sorry."

He sighs, putting down his fork. "Me, too."

Doris passes by, glances between them, then leaves muttering something about *kids these days*.

Nancy makes another hard swallow. Her anger subsides as Steve picks at his food, pensive and solemn. She can't distinguish whether his wistful memories were the cause of their current tension, or the effect, and the latter possibility prompts a stab of conscience. By her measure, she seems intent on upsetting every important male figure in her life before mid-morning.

Her remorse is especially acute as she senses the time slipping by, and the window of opportunity to make it to the police station closes. Downtown would take least thirty minutes on foot, even at a brisk pace. She considers it, nonetheless; it's unmistakable now, the urge to turn back from this mirage, and to stop pretending she could commit to this choice. The diner walls cage her in.

That is, until her gaze rises, and she again catches sight of the officer seated at the diner bar. She watches his unhurried motions intently, working up the courage to approach him. *To do something very, very stupid*. Truancy alone might not get her hauled off downtown, but if she made a scene? The entire town would talk, nevermind everyone at school. She doesn't care. *Whatever it takes*.

"Nancy."

Steve's voice - and his hand waving in her face - rudely interrupt her focus. "What?" she says.

He follows her line of sight to the cop. "Whatever crazy, idiotic thing you're thinking about doing? Don't."

“And why’s that? I mean, I wasn’t thinking about doing anything.”

“I’ll take you to the police station.”

She blinks. “What?”

“That’s where you want to go, right? Where you’d rather be.”

The defeat in his voice breaks her heart. Conflicting emotions of sorrow and relief roil through her gut. Her focus drifts to her hands in her lap, and she admits, “Yeah.” Between them it’s a whisper, but in her ears it’s a shout.

Steve’s hand dives into his pocket, and from it he extracts his wallet. He throws ten on the table, then grabs his jacket. She follows. Without another word between them, he pulls them out onto the drag and floors it in downtown’s direction. Her heart races, but she says nothing when he makes his first of several illegal passes.

Mercifully, the terrifying ride ends when Steve pulls over and stops on the curb before the police station entrance. He leaves the engine running. Nancy considers him for a moment, and glimmer of hope shimmers as she thinks of a way to salvage the situation. “Why don’t you park and come in with me?”

Steve shakes his head. His fingers open and close along the steering wheel. “I don’t think so, Nancy. Not this time. I’m no help right now. I need to go away and think for a while. Tell Jonathan I’m sorry.”

An appropriate response eludes her. She exits the car.

“Nancy, hey,” he calls to her through the passenger window. She turns. “Just-,” he starts. “Just don’t get hurt. I’ll kill him if that happens.”

She gives him a weak smile. “I can take care of myself. But thank you, Steve. For doing this.”

“Keep the thanks,” he says. He shifts the gear and pulls away before she can reply, leaving her alone on the curb, with gusts from his wake tousling her hair. His words sink in like a punch to the gut. She watches as his car disappears beyond a corner.

As the air stills, and quiet returns, her skin prickles. Her breath catches. *She wasn't too late.* She spins and darts for the station door. Her heart leaps when she catches Joyce's distinctive voice spill out the moment she pulls the handle back.

"Not here? He's not *here*? Well, you have walkies, don't you?"

Her eyes adjust from the bright morning sun, and there, past the narrow foyer, Joyce is in full attack mode, leaning forward on her elbows at the reception desk. She can't hear the receptionist's reply, but Joyce answers, "Then call him at home if you have to! I talked to him last night and he said he'd be here. Tell him he needs to stop fucking around with me, that he's better than that! And you can quote me!"

Further next to Joyce, Nancy spots him. His school bag hangs low on his back, and has a shoebox tucked under his arm. He whips aside his ragged bangs, shifting on his feet with anxiety in response to his mother's colorful harangue. He does not seem to have noticed Nancy's presence.

Behind them, however, stands Will. A smile breaks out across his face when he notices, then recognizes her. He tugs on the tail of his brother's jacket.

"Hang on just a second, Will-,"

He turns to scold his brother, but freezes with his mouth open when he spots her, too. She can't help but grin as she approaches them, as her skin flushes with a heady mixture of delight and relief. As she nears, he seems to remember himself as he picks his jaw up and returns her smile. It's a characteristically reserved turn of his lip, in the same family as what he gave her at Christmas. Yet in this instance, it's perhaps the most sincere expression she's ever witnessed from him, and it stops her heart.

"Um, not set in stone," she blurts before her lungs stop working, too.

His lip twitches, and he says, "Sure."

"Oh, Nancy!"

It's then that Joyce notices her, and she stuns Nancy when she throws her arms around her. Joyce releases her, adding, "I don't know why I'm so relieved to see you here." Her brow knits. "I hope you're not in trouble."

"Not in as much as you are."

Joyce's lip curls at her meaning, and she nods, patting her on the arm. "If only these *public servants* could figure out how to actually serve!"

"Ma'am, as I said, the Chief is on personal leave until further notice," the receptionist cuts in. "And if you continue using aggressive language, I'll have you escorted out."

"Escorted-!" Joyce spins back to the reception desk. "You know what? Fine! Give me a phone. I'll call him myself."

"Ma'am, that won't be necessary. Can someone else here assist you?"

"No! They can't! Give me a phone."

"There's a pay phone outside. Take a left, you'll see it just before the intersection."

The commotion attracts the attention of the other officers, who have trickled their way up front to back up their beleaguered receptionist. Nancy moves closer to Jonathan's side, placing a hand on his arm--whether to reassure him or herself, she is not sure. Joyce takes stock of the forces gathered against her, and mutters, "Unbelievable."

Undeterred, Jonathan says, "We aren't leaving until Hopper gets here."

An officer replies, "Nah. I think you all are done here."

"No! This is about my son! You'll have to arrest me!" Joyce says.

"Joyce, that's enough."

The voice commands the attention of everyone present, and their gaze shoots towards the station entrance. There, just inside the door,

Chief Hopper stands, stony and cold.

Notes for the Chapter:

I made up the diner in case there was any question
I'm trying my best to do Steve some justice here and
respect some of his complexity as a character, so I
hope some of the conflict he demonstrates here
makes sense.

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

Whew. OK, this took a little longer than planned--thank you for the patience. It's a tough balance between quality vs. having you all wait too long. I want it to be worth the wait! This chap has a bit more plot than Jancy, but it's time to move us forward

Hopper is out of uniform. A weathered denim jacket hangs loose over him, as do his jeans and a pale, wrinkled, buttoned shirt. He stands straight and alert, but dark circles and overgrown stubble evidence a weariness staining him through. He looks about five pounds lighter than Jonathan remembers.

Hopper addresses only Joyce when he says, "I'm sorry." It's breathy, beaten, and begs for sympathy. To Jonathan, it's evident that there is a missing explanation.

His mother, however, does not share his sensitivity to the Chief's condition. She marches over to him, leans up, and slaps an open palm across his cheek. He accepts it, flinching only just. Nancy tenses.

"You're sorry?" Joyce hisses.

Hopper remains stony and unreadable. He does, however, take her hand in his. He repeats, "Yeah. Real sorry about all this."

Joyce shifts her weight back onto her heels, slipping her hand out of his grasp. She folds her arms, saying, "Okay. So what are you going to do about it?"

"That'll depend on what you have to show me."

Joyce glances over her shoulder, and Jonathan lifts up the shoe box in his hand for him to see.

Hopper leads Jonathan, his family, and Nancy back and into the bowels of the station. The other officers stand down, and some

grumble, though they continue to track their path through the bull pen. Joyce shoots the receptionist a withering look as they pass.

Nancy trails behind Jonathan, attaching a hand to his sleeve. He glances back to her, and tries to convey some measure of reassurance, *but that's a lie. It's him who his reassured.* Her fiery resolve refreshes his. Her presence astonishes him, really, and his pulse hasn't calmed since she appeared inside the station doors. *She never stops surprising him.* He struggles to prioritize his focus on the dreadful mystery surrounding the current situation, and not on the heady elation over his private victory.

He sobers, however, once they arrive at an unoccupied interrogation room. Hopper flips the light switch, and the single, low lamp beams over a wooden table and its two chairs, the light bouncing off an otherwise cramped and bleak concrete box. It's stuffy, tolerable only due to a weak draft blowing down from a vent installed in the upper corner of the room.

Once all are present, Hopper shuts and bolts the door behind them. "Okay," he says. "Let's see it."

Jonathan sets the shoebox down on the table, then doffs his backpack. He lifts off the lid of the box and extracts the pickle jar, setting it front and center on the table.

Hopper grimaces. "You forget something?"

"I know, but it's in there," Jonathan says, anticipating Hopper's ensuing expression of confusion. The former reaches down to unzip his bag.

"What's in there?" Hopper reaches for the jar's duct-taped lid.

"No!" Nancy says. Startled, the Chief yanks his hand back, and shoots her a puzzled look.

"It's easier just to show you," Jonathan says. In his bag, he grips the handle of Steve's lamp, which he somehow managed to cram inside. With a strong yank, he frees the head and cord. His actions only deepen the folds in the Chief's brow.

“Hey, son, what on earth?” Hopper says.

“Let him be,” Joyce admonishes. “You’ll see.”

Hopper looks back toward her, then folds his arms as he waits for Jonathan to unravel the lamp’s cord. “By your leg,” the Chief says. Jonathan looks down toward the wall, and nearby he spots the room’s lone power outlet.

Once connected, Jonathan says, “Turn off the light.”

Hopper, in a cautious and controlled motion, reaches over to kill the overhead lamp light. A moment of complete darkness envelops them until the hand lamp clicks on, and washes the room in red light. Jonathan can see it clearly-- a black lump contained in the jar. Hopper sighs as his attention drops down to it. His eyes bulge when he registers the same thing.

“Holy Christ,” he swears under his breath. He examines it from side to side, saying, “That wasn’t there. Where-?” He reaches again to flip on the overhead lamp, but in the instant it comes on, the creature in the jar vanishes. He turns it off again, and the slug reappears. For good measure, he performs the test one last time. His jaw hangs open as what he observes takes a moment to sink in.

Nancy pipes up, saying, “As far as we know, this is the only way we can see them.”

“They’ve been coming out of Will,” Joyce says, her voice quaking.

Hopper rotates toward her. “They? Coming out?”

“We don’t know how many he has thrown up since last fall, but at least one a day according to him. We only found out yesterday,” Jonathan says.

Hopper then looks over to Will, whose eyes dart away.

Jonathan continues, “They were all over our house. That’s why we couldn’t stay. We’re staying at the old motel off the highway for now.”

“That dump, huh?” Hopper says as he drops to a knee. He brings his face in close to examine the specimen in the unusual light. Joyce’s breath catches when he reaches out to flick the glass with his fingers. The black creature inside does not respond. Hopper escalates by grabbing the jar and giving it a quick shake. Once again, except for its tumbling against the sides of the jar, the slug remains motionless.

In fact, Jonathan notices, the creature appears all but dead.

“Probably should have poked some holes,” Hopper observes, though Jonathan can’t tell if he means it in jest as the Chief proceeds to strip off the tape, clap his hand over the lid, and pry it open. Joyce brings a hand over her mouth, representing the palpable tension as Hopper carefully tips the jar over and pours out the slug. It takes several forceful shakes before the creature loosens and plops out onto the wood of the table in a lifeless heap.

“You got a pen or something?” Hopper asks, reaching out to Jonathan. The latter hands the lamp over to Nancy, then does the Chief one better by taking out from his bag the darkroom tongs he used the previous afternoon. The Chief nods as he takes them, and inches in close.

He jabs the tip of the tongs into the yielding flesh of the creature. The poke spurs no reaction, and so he does it again with increased firmness. Still, the slug does not respond. Hopper pinches the slug at one end and lifts it up. It droops from between the tongs, limp.

“Shit,” Hopper breathes, rotating the creature from side to side.

“What can we do?” Joyce asks.

Hopper is silent for a long second. He finally says, “I think I know someone.”

“Really?” Joyce says, her face alighting. “Who?”

He sighs, lowering the specimen. “I’m not at liberty to reveal that. But I’ll go ahead and take this thing off your hands and swing by your room when I learn anything. What number?”

Squeezing Will’s shoulders, Joyce says, “But what if more come out of

him? I-, we need to see this someone. Now.”

“I mean it when I say I’m not at liberty. Please trust me on this.”

Joyce shakes her head, and her eyes flare. “No. You’ve been treading a *very* thin line with me, Hop. You know me better than to expect I’ll accept this, this *bullshit*. What are you not telling me? What has happened to you, Hop?”

Hopper absorbs her questioning, attentive but unmoved. Jonathan cannot imagine anyone else who could weather the tempest like Hopper. It’s another talent he admires about the Chief, and he suspects that Hopper’s law enforcement training has something to do with it. More significantly - and more apparently - Hopper takes her seriously. It’s more than he can say about his own father who, when called on his bullshit, invariably crumbles away like wet sand.

“Let me just say that a lot of things have changed since last fall. I swear, I would tell you everything if I thought it was all hunky dory,” Hopper confesses. He looks back to the creature. “But this certainly does complicate things.”

Suddenly, the slug spasms.

“Shit!” Hopper says. The creature rolls, and Hopper throws it and the tongs onto the table, where it continues to writhe and convulse. Finally, it stops completely. After a beat, Hopper is the first to step forward, leaning over the table. Jonathan follows suit, then Nancy, then Joyce, with Nancy holding the red light as high overhead as she can. As they crowd around, they startle when creature seizes, and watch with horror as it begins to split in two, down its long axis like a zipper.

“What the hell,” Hopper says, uttering aloud their shared thoughts.

Jonathan snatches up the discarded jar and carefully turns it over onto the dividing slug, trapping it - them - once more. The creature finishes, and the two daughter slugs rest, their skins pulsing and undulating as though catching their breath. At the same time, they continue to grow and fatten, past the size of the original, and the space inside the jar tightens. Jonathan holds his hand firmly over the

jar, but he can feel a unsettling resistance. He tenses when the jar rattles under his hand.

Nancy's free hand slides over Jonathan's shoulder. He glances to her, and sees the reflection of his own fear.

The jar rattles and lurches again, and he strengthens his grip. Then again. The creatures writhe and spasm against their confines without rest. The force against the glass gains in strength by the second.

With the same free hand, Nancy covers his to reinforce him. Then, after a powerful blow against them, the sound of splitting glass makes Jonathan's heart stop. He can see it - a hairline fracture snaking up from the rim of the jar.

"Chief!" he says.

"Son of a bitch," Hopper says. Though with only one free arm, he loosens his jacket and shrugs it off of his shoulders.

"Hopper!" Joyce says.

He's too late. A sickening pop resounds, the fractures lengthen. Finally, the jar shatters.

"Jonathan!" Nancy says, tearing her hand away. Jonathan grips his wrist. A shard is embedded into his palm. A dark pool wells up around the point of entry.

"Oh, God!" Joyce says before covering her mouth, horrified. Jonathan, however, finds his wound far less disturbing than the two slugs, now slithering free from among the broken pieces. Blood from his hand drips onto the table, and they slide underneath the flow to indulge like leeches. A wave of nausea overwhelms him at the sight.

"Mother of-," Hopper breathes. Mercifully, he throws the jacket across the table. The jacket ripples as the slugs spasm underneath, then stop.

"You okay?" Hopper asks.

Jonathan nods, gulping down the taste of vomit in the back of his

throat.

"Got anymore tape?"

Jonathan shakes his head.

"Great," Hopper mutters. Sweat beads over his brow. Cautiously, he scoops up the jacket between his arms in an attempt to bag the creatures along with glass, tongs, and all. But as he compresses it, the slugs reanimate. They push back against the cloth, then shoot out from a loose fold. They dart from the table, slide down its legs and onto the concrete floor.

Joyce gasps, her throat closing over a shriek as she stumbles backward, pulling Will with her. Glass pieces fly as Hopper reacts by ripping up his jacket from the table. He holds it open like a matador as he closes in to recapture the slugs. They dart along the floor like panicking rats, and to complicate matters, they split up in different directions.

Still cradling his injured hand, Jonathan lifts his foot to stop one that makes a direct line for him and Nancy. It turns away, evading his heel. Meanwhile, Hopper throws his jacket onto the other, but it escapes him as well. He curses, snatching up the jacket for another try. Before the Chief can make another attempt at bagging the creatures, they herd together once more and slither up the wall. They snake towards the corner near the ceiling, where the vent offers them escape.

"Shit," Hopper says as the slugs squeeze between the slits and out of view.

Jonathan checks on his brother, who has not uttered a word since they left the lobby. His eyelids are drooped, looking listless and indifferent as though daydreaming, and showing a stark contrast to the present chaos. *This might be absurdly amusing, if Will wasn't getting worse with every second wasted.*

Nancy says, "The restroom!"

Hopper turns to her. "What?"

"Where are your toilets?"

Hopper reels. "Is this really an emergency?"

"She means that's where they're going!" Joyce says.

Jonathan snatches his bag back up as they they rush back out into the station halls. Their outfit is once again subjected to stares and odd looks from officers and public servants alike as they push through, with their Chief at the vanguard. He slings his jacket over his shoulder. The bulky device in Nancy's hand also draws attention, but not nearly as much as Jonathan's bloody hand. He wards off any prying eyes with a practiced glare.

The sound of flushing and running of water heralds their arrival, at which the Chief asks, "Which one?"

They glance between the men's and the women's, Nancy says, "Whichever is closest from the room?"

Looking to the left, "Men's it is, then."

"But how will we see them?" she says, holding up the end of the cord.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be red light, remember? Just indirect," Jonathan says. He steps forward, but Hopper holds out a hand to stop him.

"No. You go get yourself a bandage while I handle this," Hopper says.

"This will make sure they come out here," Jonathan says, holding up his hand. "You saw it. They're drawn to blood."

A deep frown mars the Chief's face. He glances over to Joyce, who nods her assent. He says to her, "Make sure no one comes in after us. I know you can." Hopper then claps Jonathan on the shoulder and ushers him forward with him.

"Anybody in here?" the Chief calls as he pushes the swing door inside. The harsh fluorescent lights hum and buzz. When no one answers, he wads up his jacket and shoves it under the door to keep

it propped open. As he does so, Jonathan steps around to search for a vent opening. He spots it in an upper corner, and off to the side of the two stalls.

“Gonna need your jacket,” Hopper says to him. Jonathan nods. Hopper assists him, and with care not to aggravate the cuts on his hand he slips his arms out of the sleeves.

“Ready?” Hopper says, his fingers resting over the light switch. Jonathan turns to nod at him. The lights snap off, and they plunge into darkness, with only the light from the hallway filtering in. As his eyes adjust, Jonathan can just make out the outlines of the two stalls, the two urinals, and a lone sink off to the side. The metal of the vent grate reflects some of the low light as well. With caution, he creeps toward the corner with the vent, and listens for Hopper to follow behind.

He stops just under the vent, and holds up his bloody hand, palm out.

“You are crazy, kid,” Hopper whispers.

They wait. And wait. “Come on,” Jonathan says, his arm shaking with muscle fatigue. Then, he sees it. A glimmer flashing from under one of the vent slits.

“Chief,” Jonathan whispers. He sees it, too, and readies the jacket as a long tendril drips down from the vent. It inches out, pausing to writhe around in the air as though sniffing out the offering of blood with each advance. Its twin also seeps out from the vent, behaving identically.

As they wait for the slugs to descend fully from their refuge, Hopper makes a silent step forward, jacket open wide. The lead slug descends close enough to reach out, elongating until its mucous-covered tendril just grazes along the top of Jonathan’s palm. His breathing, rapid and erratic, catches in his throat at the contact.

Hopper strikes. He lunges forward to net them with the jacket. At his motion, however, they detach from the wall and fall to the ground like startled insects, slipping out from under the jacket. “*Damn* it!” he curses after them as they flee underneath the nearest stall.

Jonathan races to it, and his palm stings as he pushes open the stall door forward with his injured hand. While he cannot distinguish them well in the dark, a sloshing erupts from the toilet bowl inside. As water splatters and sputters over the rim, Jonathan's shoulder slump. Their opportunity escapes through the gateway to the sewers. *Down the tubes*, his jaded mind adds.

"Now what?" Hopper says, peering into the stall.

"Now we have no idea. This is where the rest of them ended up, too."

"Jesus."

When they exit the men's room, Joyce and Nancy crowd them. Hopper holds his crumpled jacket in his hands, his expression as sullen as Jonathan feels.

"Well?" Joyce asks.

"We lost them," Jonathan says.

"Really?" Nancy says. Jonathan shrugs, unsure of what else to say to defend himself. She relents, however, when she glances back to his injured hand. To Hopper, "Can we get some bandages, then?"

"Yeah. In fact, let's all head back to the room. I'll be there in a second," Hopper says.

They return to the scene of the crime, where the overhead light glints off of the smattering of glass and blood on the table. Nancy claims the two available chairs, bringing them together. Inexplicably, Jonathan hesitates, but follows her lead when she takes his injured hand and guides him to sit next to her.

Hopper returns with gauze, ointment, and bandages, as well as a broom and dustpan under his arm. An uncomfortable silence reigns as the Chief sets about clean up, while Nancy tends to Jonathan's cut. She pries out the glass shard from his palm, and after examining it closely for any stray pieces, then proceeds to dab the cut gently with a piece of gauze. Though not nearly as severe as the cut he inflicted on himself last fall, her motions are just as careful and gentle. The situation is so familiar, yet his unabating affection for her is still alien

territory-- perhaps as alien as the Upside Down. He closes his eyes. Her fingers under his hand are so warm.

He glances up to his mother, absentmindedly grinding her teeth. Unable to restrain herself any longer, "What are we going to do, Hop?"

The glass clatters in the dustpan as he sets it down on the table. He says, "I'll figure something out. The plan doesn't have to change."

A near-forgotten idea springs to Jonathan's mind. "What about those paramedic guys? Maybe they know something. I've got pictures of their license plates."

Hopper grimaces, shaking his head. He finally says, "Fair instincts, but it's a dead end."

"What?" Jonathan says, straightening.

"Those guys, that truck? I guarantee you that they don't exist."

"What do you mean 'they don't exist'?"

"As in if I call Hawkins Hospital Corp right now, they'll say they never heard of them. Listen, just keep your head low and let me take care of this, okay? As for Will," Hopper takes another long look at him. "Tell you what. I'll take him along with me."

"Oh, no," Joyce says. "You're not taking him anywhere until I know *exactly* what you are planning to do."

"Joyce, please. We both went to hell and back last year to find your son. I learned things, saw things to that end I wish I hadn't. You were there. And you know? In some royally fucked up way, I've even grown attached to you all. And I get it. Oh, I get it. I didn't open up those old scars to have it all be for nothing. So just trust me, okay?"

Joyce studies him for a moment, chewing on his request. She turns to Will. "What do you want to do, sweetie?"

He blinks, his glassy eyes sharpening as though he were returning to the present. "What?"

“Do you want to go with the Chief?” she asks.

“Do I have to?”

“Is that what you want?”

He shrugs.

She presses, “Will, what do you feel like?”

After a deep breath, Will says, “If the Chief thinks he can help me.”

“I can,” Hopper asserts.

Joyce brings a knuckle to her lip, straining. “Okay,” she squeaks out. “But if anything, and I mean anything happens to him-,”

“I know, Joyce,” Hopper says.

She frowns. She says, “Room 26.”

“What?”

“That’s our room. I expect you not to take too long.”

“He’ll take care of him, Mom,” Jonathan says.

Hopper nods his appreciation. He fetches up the dustpan, then holds out his hand for Will. “Come on. We have to make a quick pit stop beforehand.”

Will approaches him and reaches out. A shallow smile crosses his face as he slips his slight hand into the Chief’s paw. As soon as Jonathan feels Nancy smooth out the bandage over his palm, he’s up and crossing over to his brother. Kneeling, he throws his arms around Will, and hugs him close.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am sticking to a weekly schedule as best as I can if not earlier, so the next chapter should be out before the end of next week (barring any significant RL delays)

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, once again, thank you for the patience. I'm slowing down a touch as we get deeper into some plotty chapters-- and I'm adjusting a little as I go, so they *may* take a little more time. I want the plot to be at least kinda interesting alongside the Jancy stuff. So I know it sucks to wait and it *kills* me, too, but if it seems like it's taking a hot minute for an update, please trust that I am hard at work on it! Thank you!

Hopper shepherds Nancy and the Byers back to the station lobby, pale and plodding like some ritual procession. Before leaving with Will, Hopper requests water for them, and to be left well enough alone. The receptionist fulfills the first order, then happily fulfills the second with the help of a gossip magazine. As Nancy sits with her beverage, a dull throb sets in along the back of her neck and shoulders. She rolls them, but her tight muscles complain.

Joyce looks far worse. Seated a few feet across from Nancy, she is the picture definition of frazzled. Her hair is even more wild and chaotic than usual as she cradles her head in her hands and massages her temples.

Suddenly, she bolts upright. "I need some fresh air," she says as she charges for the exit.

Seated perpendicular, Jonathan looks up and calls after her, "Be out there in a minute." After a brief sip of water, he sets his plastic cup down on the end table beside his chair. He says, "We can drop you back at school."

Nancy says, "I don't think I'll be up for it today."

"So, home then?"

She slowly rotates her head toward him. "Seriously?"

“Right. Like you’d want to come back to our palatial accommodations at Hawkins’ finest resort.”

She turns the corner of her lip up at his sarcasm. She winds up, then she pitches, “I’d just rather be with you right now.”

It’s almost charming the way he attempts to mask his reaction to her statement, but the way his brow twitches and his jaw sets gives him away. He searches her, and his redeeming features are only rivaled by how much she hates that he sees right through her. “What happened?” he asks, quiet but firm.

“Nothing.”

“How did Steve take it?”

She drops the volume of her voice to match his. “What?”

“You did tell him, right?”

“He knows where I am, if that’s what you mean. He even dropped me off.”

“Really? So he’s fine with this?”

She huffs. “This is what you’re thinking about? How about, I don’t know, the fact that there are those things in the sewers which we just discovered can *multiply*.”

Jonathan sits back, grabbing up his water and taking a sip. “I’ll just have to ask him myself when I see him.”

“You are so aggravating sometimes.”

“Sorry.” After a sigh, he then says, “Listen, I am grateful you showed up. And yeah, I’m worried. I’m actually scared as shit, but it’s just easier for me to think about-,” He glances at her, and with a shrug says, “This.”

“It is overwhelming, but the Chief must have some idea about what to do.”

“Yeah. You ready? Mom might let herself die of exposure if we wait too long.”

Nancy makes note that by *fresh air* Joyce means *cigarette*, one of which she drops and stamps out with the ball of her shoe once she glances back and sees Nancy and Jonathan slip from the station doors. Jonathan had the mindfulness to bring along her forgotten cup of water.

“Nancy wants to stick around with us, if that’s okay,” Jonathan says.

Joyce responds, “Of course. I don’t care. You both are old enough to make your own decisions.”

She’s eerily calm, with chin tilted up to the sky. Nancy takes the cup from Jonathan and offers it to her. “Ms. Byers, are you alright?”

She scoffs at the cup in her hand. “Coffee would have been better,” she says. Her focus drifts as she says, “Goddamn, Hop.”

Nancy glances back to Jonathan, who unhelpfully shrugs in return.

“Let’s get back to the hotel, maybe,” she suggests.

Joyce nods. “Yeah.” She pauses to search Nancy’s face, then says, “I can’t believe you want to get mixed up in all this. If I were your age?” She answers her own question with another scoff.

“It’s not a choice,” Nancy replies, and rather truthfully.

“Well, thank you anyway,” Joyce answers, glancing back to Jonathan. He looks away, shoving his bandaged hand deep into his coat pocket.

Chester barks from behind the door as Jonathan fits the key into the lock of Room 26. Nancy half expects the hotel to crumble around the frame as Jonathan forces the sticky door open. While the air is warm enough against her aching cheeks, the pervasive stench of old cigarettes compels her to breathe through her mouth. Jonathan lifts

his brow in way that says I told you so. Combined with the discolored ceiling and patchy drywall, the scene causes her revisit an idea she had the night before.

She waits for Chester to abandon his perch on the bed as Joyce falls back onto it. The dog makes its way over to Nancy and sniffs at her hand. “Maybe you all should stay at my place. We have a guest room and a pull-out couch. Mom doesn’t mind dogs, and Dad will agree to anything she says.”

Joyce sits up. “That’s very sweet, but I want Hopper to be able to find us as soon as he comes back. Don’t trouble yourself.”

Nancy nods. *Well, she tried.*

Glancing between her and Jonathan, Joyce adds, “You two don’t have to stick around here if you don’t want to.”

“It’s fine,” Nancy says. “Really.”

Joyce waves her off. “I’m sure you’d just be bored.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Jonathan says.

Confusion twists Nancy’s brow as he nods his head toward the exit. “Okay,” is all she manages before he’s guiding her back out of the room. A chilly gust burns her thawing cheeks. She worries about Joyce, but she also looked forward to warming up, and she lets Jonathan know with a pointed look.

“Should we be leaving her alone right now?” she asks.

He answers, “That was my mom’s way of saying ‘go away’. Don’t worry. She’s not easy for others to interpret sometimes.”

“Oh.” He’s spent a lifetime learning how to read her. Somehow, that makes her feel guilty.

“She just needs a few minutes. She’ll be fine. Come on.”

Jonathan strikes up a healthy pace, hands buried in his coat pockets. She follows, but does not share his confidence when she takes

another glimpse at their *palatial* accommodations as he described it. The vacant car lot suggests a lack of occupancy, which gives her some relief. Perhaps some of the more ghastly rumors about the place's character were overblown, but she's nonetheless grateful for the daylight.

A silence lengthens between them as they wander across the hotel, interrupted only by the scrape and clatter of the odd pebble she kicks away. She steals a glance over to him, she wonders what happens next-- with the Upside Down, and between them. A jolt travels up her spine, and her skin tingles. She supposes that what happens next is up to them.

They pass the payphone. Its housing is weathered and coated with filth. "Jonathan," she says.

"Hm?" He stops.

As does she. The strange magnetism comes over her again, sudden and fierce. She takes his hand, swift like opposite poles coming into contact. A nagging urge enters her mind, and she says, "You want to know why I chose you?"

He glances down at their hands, the shrugs. "Sure."

"Because I want to understand this."

"Well, I do, too. I mean, it's my brother, and he's caught up in the center of something again-,"

"No. I mean, I want to help your brother, too. But I also mean between us."

"What's there to solve?"

"Don't you feel it, too?"

"Feel what?"

She runs her thumb over his fingers. "A pull."

"I'm not sure."

She tries to ignore her disappointment. "I feel it all the time. Like now."

"What kind of pull?"

"It's like I know where you are, when you're near. Ever since that time in the forest."

He avoids her eyes, and it frustrates her. Her jaw clenches.

"Don't you want to know why?" she says.

"Not really," he replies, without hesitation.

She pulls her hand away from him. "No?"

He says, "Honestly, I don't care. All I know is that I don't need powers or magic to know that you're important to me."

He hits her with that, and the warmth that floods her temples is unbearable. Her lip quivers, and she quells them with a run of her fingers over them. She confesses, "Neither do I." There's something intense about his gaze, though, and she only realizes what he intends the instant he leans down and presses his lips to hers. It's absurd how surprised she is at first, but soon she presses back, brushing her fingers along his collar. His lips are chapped, but warm.

He is holding his breath, and she smiles against his lips before withdrawing from him. He lets out a burst of air from his lungs, and her smile broadens.

"Not your first, is it?" she asks.

He rolls his eyes. "That bad, huh?"

"No," she assures him. She grins. She's elated, weightless even.

He's about to reply, when a shrill sound brings them both crashing back down to earth: the payphone rings.

The old, crusty thing *rings*, and she doesn't believe her ears at first. Jonathan, however, clearly hears it, too by the way his expression

falls. They snap to the phone when it rings again.

“Jonathan,” she whispers, her heart dropping deep inside her belly.

The shrill noise draws them in. She scans their vicinity before saying, “Maybe we should leave it.” She ignores her own advice, however, when Jonathan takes a few cautious steps toward the phone. After another ring, Jonathan charges forward and snatches up the receiver. He places it against his ear, and turns to fix his gaze on her. “Hello?”

A pause. “Hello?” he tries again. Suddenly, his eyes widen, and he yanks the receiver away.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Some interference, then...” he hesitates. Setting the receiver back on its hook, “‘Room’.”

“‘Room?’ Who was it?”

“No idea. They hung up.”

“Room,” she repeats aloud. “Like your room? Here?”

Jonathan blinks, and in the next second he races back for the room. She keeps up over the cracked asphalt, and once they arrive he gives the door a vigorous knock. Chester acknowledges them with a low woof, but they detect no other sound from beyond the wooden barrier. After a moment, Jonathan tries the handle. It’s unlocked, so the door swings open. Light snoring draws Nancy’s attention toward the bed, where Joyce appears to have fallen back into a deep slumber, and thus undisturbed by their intrusion. Resting in the gap between the foot of the bed and the dresser, Chester gives them a token glance, then curls back toward his hind legs.

“I guess Hopper did Mom at least one favor. Don’t think she’s slept much in days,” he says, his voice low. She scans the room, her senses heightened as they do when confronted with the unknown.

“What should we do?” she asks.

Jonathan moves like a ghost, floating over Chester. He whips his

head about, searching for a clue as to the mysterious message.

A faint crackling sound fills the room. Jonathan hops back over Chester, the latter roused again by the noise. The dog woofs in the direction of the source: on the nightstand by the bed, Will's walkie-talkie rests. A high-pitched whine joins in the noise of radio interference. Joyce stirs and smacks her lips, but her eyes remain closed.

Then, low and garbled through the walkie: "Jon-,? Jonathan, y-...there?"

Nancy meets Jonathan's eyes, and they stare at one another, paralyzed at first.

"That was Mike," Nancy whispers.

The walkie crackles again, clearer. A second voice says, "Hey, we know this is kind of a long shot, but if you're there, pick up, over." Dustin.

Jonathan scrambles for the walkie. He snatches it and bolts for the outside. Nancy follows him out to the curb where he brings the handset to his lips. He says, "I'm here. What do you guys want?"

"Jonathan, it's Mike. Nancy's brother. Over."

"I know," he replies. "She's right here."

"Really?" Mike replies.

She huffs and snatches the handset out of Jonathan's hand. She fumbles with the grip until her finger settles over the talk button. "Don't you *dare* tell Mom."

"We don't give a shit about that right now," Dustin answers. "This is about Will, over."

With about as much courtesy, Jonathan rips the walkie back from her. "What about him? We left him with the Chief."

"Well, that explains it," Mike says.

“Explains what?” Jonathan says, irritated.

“We saw the Chief on our way back,” Mike says.

Jonathan blanches, mirroring Nancy’s own reaction. “What do you mean?” he asks.

“We came back so we could get in range of these things. That’s when we saw him pulled over along the side of the road with Will. Since you weren’t there, we just wondered.”

When Jonathan next depresses the button, Nancy pulls the handset to her. “What were you doing out there in the first place?”

Mike says, “We used our compasses to locate another portal.” He pauses, then, “To find El. It led us to some big facility at the edge of town.”

She shuts her eyes at the mention of El, and she figures the conversation with her brother than morning planted a seed of hope in his mind.

“What kind of facility?” Jonathan asks the boys.

“We’re not really sure, but it smells like the swamps of Dagobah, over,” Dustin says.

To her, Jonathan says, “The wastewater plant.”

“How do you know that?”

“They were here last night.”

“Who?”

Mike’s voice cuts in, “Hey, you guys still there?”

Jonathan brings the handset back to his lips. “Yeah. Just a second.” To Nancy he says, “A utility van from Hawkins wastewater. They were watching us. I know it.”

Not wholly convinced - and half in denial - she suggests, “Maybe they

were doing some repair work?”

He frowns at her half-baked theory. “In the dead of night?”

“Just saying. This place is pretty old.”

“No, I doubt it. They took off the second I spotted them.”

Shit. “It’s another front, then?”

“Hey, if Will’s in trouble again, we could use some help.” Mike interrupts. “We can explain more later. Just keep the walkie on and meet us along the highway headed south. Otherwise we’re going ahead without you.”

Dustin cuts in, “Seconding the call for reinforcements, over. Lucas thirds.”

"Damn it, Mike," she sighs. "We can't let him get himself into trouble."

Jonathan’s grip on the walkie falters. He says, “We’ll head over now.”

“Nice,” Dustin says.

The walkie falls from Jonathan’s lips. “I should have a map in the car.”

Her eyes dart to back to the open hotel room door. “What about your mom?”

He hesitates. She knows it’s killing him to have to decide. He says, “We’ll just go see what else your brother has to say. Maybe we check it out for him, confront the Chief if we have to. If it looks sketchy, we’ll come back before she has a chance to worry. Chester will be here.”

Jonathan hands her the walkie, then turns to head back inside. One of few compliments of the hotel, a pen and a block of stationery avail themselves on the dresser. He scribbles out a note, tearing off several pieces in order to fit the entire message. “Just in case,” he says, his writing hand shaking for the duration. When he sets the pen down,

his chin falls, and he stands as if frozen in time.

Nancy reaches out to touch his elbow. "Let's go." The combination of touch and voice seems to shake him from his trance, and he nods. The car keys jingle as he locates them in his jacket pocket.

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

Woo hoo! I'm still on schedule. More plot, more conflict, more angst inc

The last gas station passes by them, the last stop before the endless expanse of Indiana wilderness. The near-deserted road out of town stretches ahead, and civilization tapers away behind them. The with the only other sign of human presence is a tall chain link fence running alongside the highway, and seems to stretch on for eternity.

The smell rolls in like a fog. Tolerable at first, but grows in intensity for about every hundred meters they cross. It's a musty, vaguely noxious odor that he can detect even when he inhales through his mouth. Next to him, Nancy folds up the map. "Shouldn't be much further." She curls her nose. "Obviously."

Her breathing shudders despite her calm demeanor. *She's trying to keep it together.* So is he for that matter, and to reassure her otherwise seems not only pointless, but an insult to both of their intelligences. Considering the short span of time, recent events dizzy him to think about. *Especially...* The gladness that balloons in his chest is almost uncomfortable when he thinks about her smile after he took his gamble of kissing her. An act he imagined would only ever happen at gunpoint, but then at the hotel seemed as natural of an impulse as breathing. And she *smiled*.

He squeezes the steering wheel, and shivers as the scar on his hand - the one from last fall - tingles with sharp, phantom pinpricks.

Nancy inhales sharply.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," she replies, rubbing the palm of her hand with a thumb.

Suddenly, a figure just ahead waves to them moving out of a camouflage of trees and dead leaves.

“Jonathan!” Nancy cries out.

Jonathan hits the brakes. They lurch to a stop, and breathes a sigh of relief. He lifts his foot and the car proceeds in a slow roll as he pulls over onto the shoulder. He throws the car into park as Mike rolls up with his bike, trailed by Dustin.

Nancy flies out of the car first, slamming the car door behind her. She says to Mike, “We nearly ran you over!”

“Whoa, hey! Sorry,” Mike says.

“Alright,” Dustin says, pleased as punch at their arrival. The walkie at his belt crackles.

“Guys, you there? Over,” comes through. Lucas.

Dustin tears the handset from his waist and answers, “Yeah. What’s your status? Over.”

“Still here, and he’s still stopped at a gate to some dirt road. He’s just kind of sitting there. Like he’s waiting for something. Are you guys coming back, or what?”

Mike takes up his walkie and says, “Okay, just hang tight. Sis and Jonathan are here, over.”

“Roger that, over.”

“So? Bring us up to speed,” Jonathan says.

Dustin answers, “We had Lucas keep an eye on the Chief further up the road.”

Mike adds, “When we found him, was coming back out of the woods with Will a little ways back.”

“What were they doing in the woods?” Nancy asks.

Mike says, “No clue. That’s when we decided to radio you. Still can’t believe you picked up.”

“Just a lucky coincidence,” Jonathan says, though the strange phone call at the hotel jumps to his mind. The voice seems familiar, but in the next instant he’s not so sure. On impulse, he swivels and checks around them. No other soul is in sight, yet he cannot shake the creep of eyes on his back.

Dustin says, “Well, now that you’re here, we can go get some answers.” He brings the walkie back to his lips. “Lucas, we’re headed your way. Anything to report? Over.”

“Nothing right now. He’s still waiting, over.”

“Let’s go,” Mike suggests, turning his bike.

“Mike,” Nancy calls.

He twists to look at her over his shoulder.

She tells him, “We’ll help you, but I’m not going to let you do anything stupid, okay?” She huffs in annoyance when Mike stops just short of an eye roll, but a sputter from his lips dismisses her.

“Hang on!” bursts from their walkies. “A van’s pulled up. Utility.”

They freeze for a half-second until Jonathan rallies them, saying, “Car’s faster. Let’s go.” Mike and Dustin throw down their bikes and dash to the car.

Jonathan turns over the ignition and the car engine roars back to life. The walkie crackles again. “They’re opening the gate!”

From the back seat, Dustin shouts into the walkie, “Just-, just hang on! We’re on our way!”

Lucas says, “The Chief just followed the van onto the dirt road! Come on, you guys!”

Jonathan homes in on a plume of dust in the distance. By the time he pulls over and parks, however, the gate is shut, and the last of the haze disperses with a burst of biting cold wind. With his bike, Lucas dashes out from his hiding spot across the road, binoculars in hand.

“They went inside,” Lucas says.

“Damn it,” slips from Mike’s mouth as they approach the gate. A heavy chain and a massive padlock seals the way, and clatters against the iron beams when Mike shakes it. He turns to ask, “What now?”

What now, indeed? Jonathan glances up, estimating the chain link barrier to be about eight feet high-- discouraging enough to trespassers, but not so formidable as to attract curiosity about whatever secrets lurk beyond. He clenches his jaw. He dashes for the links, threading his fingers and toes through the metal and pulling himself up.

“Jonathan,” Nancy calls after him. He doesn’t stop, however, until he throws his leg over the top and hops down.

He turns. “You coming?”

“Nice,” Dustin gushes, while Mike’s and Lucas’ expressions alight with renewed hope. Jonathan fights to suppress a smile, however, when it’s Nancy who is next to follow suit, deftly scaling and hoisting herself over the fence. Her example galvanizes the boys, and at once all three attack the fence.

Once landed for on the other side, Jonathan leads their party over a shallow rise through the woods, and alongside the dirt path. He squints, finding it difficult to distinguish much in the wintry sea of gray and brown before him. Nonetheless, he can just make them out through the buffer of trees: the cylinders and domes of the treatment plant, and its accompanying bevy of white plaster buildings--monoliths of bare functionality. The leaf litter rustles a bit too loudly for his ears as they weave between tangles of trees and over half-buried stones.

They come up on a gap in the forest floor where the of the dirt access curves slightly, then runs up towards the compound. The rumble of a idling engine stops him in his tracks, and he dives for shelter behind a fallen tree. He checks over his shoulder. Nancy and the boys take his cue and fall in around him. Lucas leans over the log, binoculars up.

“What do you see?” Mike whispers.

Peeking over the top, Jonathan sees it quite plainly without the binoculars-- a beige utility van, bearing blue lettering along its side.

“Same utility van,” Lucas confirms. “And the Chief’s car.”

“Why are they stopped?” Dustin asks.

Lucas is silent for a moment as he surveys the scene. “Hard to tell,” he says. “Tree is in the way.”

“Give me those,” Mike demands.

“No way,” Lucas shrugs him off. Mike makes a grab at the binoculars, but Lucas yanks them away. “Stop!”

“*Shh!*” Jonathan admonishes, cringing at how their voices carry through the silent wood. He holds his hand out to Lucas. “Let me, please.”

Lucas hesitates, but then places the binoculars in his palm. He focuses on the Chief’s car. Through the trees, he has a clear view of the front seats, and confirms the Chief and Will are still inside. He sweeps over to the van. A nondescript passenger tosses a cigarette butt out the window.

“Well?” Mike pleads.

“Chief’s there, and Will. They’re just waiting,” Jonathan says. “Hang on.”

Another utility van appears from the direction of the treatment plant. He tracks it as it parks alongside the first van, facing the opposite way.

“What’s going on?” Nancy whispers, giving voice to his exact thoughts.

“Another van, more goons.” His brow twitches when he sees movement. “They’re getting out of the second van. Chief and Will are getting out, too.”

He spies a woman in a blond bob and a black trenchcoat. Two of the utility men flank her, and the three of them approach Will and the Chief. The Chief speaks, gesturing to Will. The trenchcoat's mouth moves with her reply. Whatever she says agitates the Chief, who places his hands on his hips and responds along with a shake of his head.

"Jonathan," Nancy prods.

"I think they're arguing," he says.

The trenchcoat nods her chin towards the Chief. The workmen each place their hands on pistols holstered at their belts.

"Will!" Jonathan says, dropping the binoculars from his eyes. His lungs tighten. Every muscle in his body screaming for him to vault over the log and do...do something. The only thing keeping him from transforming into a bolt of lightning is Nancy's hand on his shoulder.

"What's going on?" Mike hisses. He seizes the opportunity to snatch up the binoculars and have a look himself. He gapes. "They've got guns. They're taking him. Taking Will!"

"Oh my God," Nancy says.

"What the hell?" Dustin says.

Mike grunts with irritation. "I can't see, but I think they're taking him to one of the vans."

Lucas says, "We've got to do something!"

"We have to stop this," Jonathan says. He moves to stand, but Nancy tightens her grip on him.

"And get yourselves shot? That won't do Will any good, either," she says. Her reasoning cools his impulses, but only down to a rolling boil in his veins. The vans start up again, and the first van pulls off towards the treatment plant. After a K-turn, the second follows behind. It's an excruciating minute, but the instant he sees the second van disappear toward the facility, Jonathan shrugs Nancy off and launches himself toward the Chief's car.

“Jonathan!” she calls.

He throws aside the crosshatch of young tree branches that bar his way, blazing a line through the forest. His jaw trembles, not from the cold, but from pure rage at the Chief’s double-cross. His *betrayal*. He arrives at the crest of a shallow slope leading down to the road. The Chief’s car idles in park, and Hopper himself leans back in the driver’s seat. He’s in a half-daze as he runs a hand over his chin. Just as he moves to shift the gear, he glances up. His eyes widen.

“What the hell? What the hell are you doing?” he barks as he steps out and throws the car door shut.

“You tell me,” Jonathan says, matching Hopper’s glare. “*Right* now!” Leaves rustle, and twigs snap behind him.

“Oh, God. You are-,” Hopper starts, seeing Nancy and the boys. “Get down here! All of you!”

“What did you do with Will?” Mike asks.

Hopper insists, “Kids, I am not joking. If they see you, we’re all gonna disappear. You hear me? Get in the car and I promise I’ll explain.”

“We’re all gonna disappear? You handed him over to those-, those *people*! The ones who kept her like some lab animal! The ones who made *her* dis-...” Mike’s breath catches, and he chokes on his last word. “Now you’re letting them do that to Will?”

“Damn it, I will explain! Just get in the car, okay?” Hopper pleads.

“Mike,” Nancy says, placing her hand on his back. “Let’s just hear what he has to say.”

Jonathan huffs, taking exception to her statement, and he lets her know with a pointed look. The facts are plain. *An open mind is more than the Chief deserves.*

Mike wipes his eye with the back of his hand, and swallows down a lump of emotion. Then, he bares his teeth. “No!” He bolts, taking off for the road toward the treatment plant.

“Mike!’ Nancy shouts, and Dustin and Lucas echo her.

Almost on reflex, Jonathan sprints after him. With longer legs, he quickly closes in and grabs Mike by his coat, spinning him around. Jonathan claps a hand around Mike’s wrist, but Mike twists and pulls.

“Hey, I’m pissed, too. But you’re going to get yourself hurt,” Jonathan says.

“I don’t care.” Anger and pain still twist Mike’s expression, and with surprising strength, he yanks back hard on Jonathan’s grip. He nearly frees himself, but Jonathan redoubles his hold until he hears footsteps crunch in the dirt behind him.

“Kid,” Hopper says. He approaches Mike and kneels down. “I get how you feel, but do you want to know why I turned him over?”

“Screw you,” Mike spits.

Unphased, Hopper says, “Because of her.”

Mike freezes. So, too, does Jonathan’s blood.

“What?” Jonathan says, releasing Mike and turning about.

“Now, would you all get in the car?” the Chief says, rising and turning on his heel.

Jonathan releases Mike, the latter in a visible state of shock. Jonathan puts a hand on his back, and they follow the Chief. Hopper makes a circuit and opens the back doors. “Good thing you’re all small enough to fit.” To Jonathan, he opens the front passenger door and says, “‘Cept for you.”

Jonathan swallows, alleviating his dry throat enough to say, “Nancy gets shotgun.”

“Suit yourself. Just get in.”

“Come on, guys,” Jonathan says to the boys. He looks up to Nancy. Her brow is tightly knit.

She says, "What did he say to you two?"

"Let's get in the car first," Jonathan insists. He's too dazed to remember his ire. *Was she...alive?* He crams into the back seat with the boys, with Dustin half-seated on his leg and Lucas', then Mike. Nancy hesitates, slowly entering the front passenger seat.

As the Chief turns and heads them back toward the gate Dustin winces as his head taps against the ceiling. He ducks down and says, "So uh, what gives?"

Jonathan swallows the lump forming in his throat. He's about to spill when Mike says, "El." It's a single syllable, yet it sweeps a chill over them as though it were the breath of first frost.

"El?" Nancy repeats, looking back to Mike, then to the Chief.

"It's complicated," Hopper says.

"What do you mean? She's alive?" Lucas asks. "Ow!"

"Sorry," Dustin says as Lucas makes a vain attempt to scoot a millimeter out from under him.

"What do you mean? Are you saying you don't know for sure?" Nancy asks.

"I'm told they've found her. In some form. She's cooperating with them."

"They're lying," slips out from Jonathan. He regrets it when he remembers Mike, and corrects himself, "I mean, how do you know they're telling you the truth? Are you working for them?"

"Not exactly," Hopper replies.

"Then they've got something on you," Jonathan deduces.

Hopper remains silent. The car stops, and he throws it into idle. "One sec."

They're stopped at the gate, where Hopper digs and pulls a key from

his pocket. Meanwhile, Nancy turns to Mike.

"Mike," she says, gentle. "You okay?"

His gaze is far away, and his head sways, appearing as though struck on the head. He says, "She's got to be alive."

"Oh, brother," Dustin says.

"Let him have his moment," Lucas says. He thrusts his elbow into Dustin. "And stop digging into me!"

Before a heated exchange of elbows escalates, the driver door pops open and the Chief sits back inside. However, he does not touch the gear shift. Instead, he bows his head forward, sighing.

"They were going to take him, anyway," Hopper says, as though the car were a confessional. "Will, that is."

Despite Dustin's weight on his leg, Jonathan sits forward as best as he can. "What do you mean?"

"By force, if necessary. As in breaking down your door and leaving no witnesses. I couldn't let that happen. So I convinced them to let me take Will, so that," his voice cracks, and he runs a hand over his face. Clearing his throat, he tosses a glance toward the back seat, to Jonathan. "So that no harm would happen to him, to you, or your Mom. Lord knows she can be a goddamn bear."

The information sinks in, raw and unprocessed. Rather than understanding, the Chief's confession simply feeds fresh oxygen to Jonathan's indignation. Like a backdraft, it explodes within him. He struggles to speak as though his mind and his throat have fallen out of sync.

He adores Nancy as the words he wants to say fall from her mouth: "How could you? If you knew what was going to happen, why couldn't you stop it? That's his *brother*, who you worked your ass off to save!"

Hopper turns to her. "And that's what I did today. It's for his own good."

"How do you know that?" Nancy presses him.

Hopper huffs, shifting the gear back into drive, but not yet taking his foot off of the brake.

Suddenly, Jonathan feels the strength return to his voice. "How *the hell* do you know that?"

Hopper's jaw shifts as he grinds his teeth. "Why don't I take the boys, while you two follow me. I'd like to show you all something."

"No way. You're probably gonna turn us in, too," Dustin says.

"That's stupid. If he wanted to turn us in he wouldn't be driving us out," Lucas rejoins.

"Maybe he's luring us into a false sense of security."

Hopper sighs. "You know, I can hear you."

Mike cuts in, saying, "Guys, if there's even a chance El is alive, then I'm coming along. You guys can just bike home if you want."

"We'll go," Nancy says, nodding to Jonathan.

He shakes his head, however, unsatisfied by the Chief's evasive answers. "I think we should just go home." He throws the door open and exits the car just as Hopper pulls out past the gate, coming to a stop just beyond.

"Hang on," Nancy says to the Chief as she exits and circles around. He can hear her on the gravel shoulder, following Jonathan towards his car. She says, "Wait!"

He stops, blinking slowly, as another surge of anger burns through his last shreds of patience. His jaw sets, and he whips around. Pointing to the Chief, "He sold my brother out! He looked us straight in the eye and said he'd fix this! Instead, he went behind our backs and handed him over to the *fucking* Devil!"

"To protect you. And your mother," Nancy replies.

“Please. You actually believe that horseshit? I thought he was better, but he’s just like anyone else. Nothing but *liars*.”

“Calm down,” she admonishes him, holding both palms out to him. “I know you’re angry. He did, he lied to us. But I think he is being sincere about his intentions. There’s something more going on here, right? If we can find out, then maybe we can still help Will, and my brother. You believe me, don’t you?”

His skin bristles, and he grinds his teeth as she speaks. His attention drifts. It’s awful. Even as he searches her glassy blue eyes, he’s not sure if he does believe her, and it forces one conclusion within him: *he’s still a screwed up asshole. An asshole who mistakenly believed he was anything but.*

“Don’t you?” she repeat, heaving a sigh.

He whips back around and heads for the car before he loses the last ounce of his composure. “I’m going back to the hotel. You can come with me or go with the Chief. Up to you.” It comes out cold and devoid of emotion.

“You’re no better,” Nancy says.

He stops and twists around to look at her. *No better?* His brow furrows and he continues toward his car. “Whatever.”

“I’m going with the Chief. I will figure this out, with you or not!”

“Fine. Hope I’ll see you around.”

He can’t hold back the petulance in his reply, nor the vigor in which he gets in the car and turns over the ignition. After a quick circle onto the highway, he guns it. She dwindles away in his side mirror as the endless trees fly past. Only when she disappears from view does he cover his lips with his scarred hand, and allow a bitter brew of despair and loathing to pour from his eye.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all again for the feedback, whether it’s comments, subs, or kudos! Hard to get away from the

voice telling me nothing makes sense and it all sucks. Regardless! I am taking the glass half-full approach and assuming everyone is just on the edges of their seats versus being bored to death. Enjoy!

15. Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

I am so, SO sorry for the wait! As I mentioned in the comments, I am making sure I am happy (as much as I can be) with the next section of this story-- action is rising, after all. Even when I have a basic outline, I sometimes want to 'test' it by writing out some parts beforehand so I can make changes if need be. I'm like, 90% confident now at this point, so I hope not to make you guys wait as long for the next chapter.

Jonathan makes a wide U-turn back onto the highway. Nancy spins on her heel, fighting back tears and swallowing down a pang of nausea as the thrum of his car fades. The nausea worsens when she feels the Chief's and the boys' staring at her. Hopper glances over to her as she throws open the passenger door and falls back into the car, heavy.

"He's not coming." She presses a thumb to the corner of her eye as she sits back.

Dustin says, "We figured. We heard you guys all the way over here. It's not a surprise, though. It's what lovers do. They quarrel." His statement stabs at her brain like a knife scratching on ceramic.

"Shut up, Dustin," Mike says, disgust evident in his voice.

"What?" he says. His clueless question hangs in the air unanswered until he leans back in a huff.

Lucas tells him, "You are so rude sometimes."

"Just trying to help, guys."

"That's the problem," Lucas presses.

"Okay, cut it out," Hopper says, stern. He takes a moment to breathe and collect himself. Nancy realizes he must have heard Jonathan's choice words, too. After a sigh, the Chief shifts the gear out of park.

Her eyes continue to leak, and she wipes them with the pads of her fingers. She says, "Where are we going?"

He pulls onto the highway. "A little ways back. 'Scuse me a sec." He reaches over to pop open the glove box. From it, he extracts a shortwave radio receiver. "Hang onto this," he says as he drops it in her lap.

She reflexively catches the boxy, knobby thing between her hands, and traces her thumbs across one of its dials. "What's this for?"

"You'll see."

Whether it's due to the lingering tension of the argument she had with Jonathan, or the anticipation of where the Chief was leading them, the boys keep to themselves for the duration of the two miles or so the Chief drives. He pulls over, opposite the side with the interminable fence. A wooden stake nearby, with reflector tape wrapped around the top, sticks up out of the dirt as though a grave marker. They follow Hopper's lead after he unceremoniously rips the key from the ignition and throws the car door open, and circles around to beeline into the woods.

Nancy glances down, noting that the ground has the beginnings of a shallow trench, worn away by foot. She tucks the radio underneath her arm as she parts away dead twigs in her path. The boys follow up behind.

"I bet he's gonna do us in. Shallow graves. No witnesses," Dustin says, drawing a line across his throat.

"You can wait in the car if you want," Mike throws over his shoulder to him.

"Oh, hell no," Dustin answers, prompting a sigh from Lucas.

The highway melds into the background behind them as they penetrate deep into the wood. The thicket of trees opens up, and a circle of sunlight filters down overhead into a break in the dense tree cover, save for an old, large beech tree at the center. There, resting atop a knot in the tree roots and among a carpet of leaf litter, is a box

with a heavy lid and metal latch.

“Neat. A treasure chest,” Dustin points out. Mike shushes him as the Chief sets to work.

It’s almost ritualistic the way Hopper bows his head, flicks open the latch on the box, and pushes the lid open with both hands. As if he’s waiting for some deity to strike him down over one false move. A strange sight, as Nancy never took the Chief for a man of superstition-- then again, she thinks, everyone present knows that superstition can be anything but.

“Switch that on,” Hopper says, pointing to the radio under Nancy’s arm.

Nancy starts as she absorbs his instructions, unsure of where this was leading. She fumbles at first, but finds the correct knob and clicks it on. A low electromagnetic buzz of radio noise sounds from its honeycombed speaker. Her confusion reaches its height when she spies a cheap plastic bag resting on top of various clutter. Inside the bag is...Eggos?

She can hear Mike’s breath catch. “Chief,” she says.

He insists on her silent attention with a raised finger. By his gesture, she listens, trying to parse exactly what he intends for them to hear. Only static so far, an a faint, shrill whine of interference.

Suddenly, Mike turns to her and snatches the receiver from out of her hands. “Mike!” she chides, but he ignores her as he turns the volume dial and presses the speaker to his ear.

“El,” he says. “Come on!” he smacks the receiver with the butt of his palm.

“Hey, kid. Be patient,” the Chief says, standing. “Just listen. It might be a minute.”

The snowy static and shrill whines continue. A minute lengthens into many, until Nancy feels her legs start to complain. Dustin and Lucas prove to be of the same mind when they each find a cleanish spot to sit on the forest floor. She elects to lean against a tree, shivering as

the winter air steadily leeches heat from her. Mike, however, either has greater stamina, or cares for little else other than the receiver in his hands. Either way, he remains glued with baited breath.

The Chief, too, begins to pace. He seems agitated by the wait.

Nancy closes her fist and runs her ring finger over the scar of her palm. She chews her lip, then says, "Chief."

"Yeah?"

"Do you have knife?"

His brow knits.

"A blade. Or even keys?" she suggests.

"What? Why? Just wait, okay?"

"Blood," she says. "What if we try blood?"

"Are you out of your mind?" Hopper says.

Lucas says, "Yeah. Who knows what we'll summon? It might not even be El."

"Just relax. You'll hear her if she's there," Hopper says.

"If?" Mike repeats.

Hopper sighs. "She'll be here." Suddenly, the noise of the receiver shifts. The corner of Hopper's lip curls up. "Listen closely, kid."

Mike.

Mike lifts his chin sharply. Nancy glances about, for the voice does not sound like it is coming from directly the receiver as much as it is all around them.

"Wow," Dustin remarks.

Mike swallows thickly, and as though speaking to the forest itself he answers, "El?"

I'm here.

“Where!”

Please, an offering. Then I can explain.

“An offering?” He looks over to the chest. “Those?”

No...

The crackles and whines from the receiver rise in volume. Nancy winces, clapping her hands over her ears as the piercing, shrill noise fills the air around them.

Mike drops the receiver, overcome by the intolerable sound. The heavy device hits the edge of a stone hard at an angle, and the noise deadens instantly as the casing buckles before tumbling to a stop.

“Oh, shit,” Dustin says, his hands falling from his ears.

“No!” Mike says, scrambling to recover what he can of the device.
“No, no, *no...*”

Nancy looks up to Hopper, expecting him to react, but instead remains stony. He does, however, reach into his back pocket.
“Offering, huh...”

He extracts a switchblade from his pocket.

Nancy catches his eye, and nods with understanding as to what he is about to do. He takes a breath as he studies the knife, debating with himself. He looks over to Mike, the latter having paused to look at him, anguished and pleading. With a hard swallow, Hopper unfurls the blade and presses it into his palm.

Then, without pause for the pain, he slices through his palm. Blood pours from the wound, and he turns it to drip onto the forest floor. He wipes the stained blade on his leg.

“Badass,” Dustin says.

Suddenly, the Chief doubles over, clutching his palm and crying out.

Nancy grunts, too, as phantom pins and needles pierce her palm. The boys gape at the Chief, petrified, but then a loud crack rips through the air, like that of snapped lumber, or a tree limb tearing away in a storm. The source is a large, deep crack that appears in the maple's trunk. The snapping continues as the breach grows, cutting out a jagged semi-circle in the trunk. Once the rift completes, the cutout section of trunk slides up in a most unnatural fashion, like a panel sliding over a trap door.

Dustin and Lucas leap to their feet, and Mike grows pale. Grinding his teeth, the Chief slides his uninjured hand to the piece at his side. The pinpricks in her palm subside, but her pulse thuds under her chin. The opening is larger, but the fleshy, mucous-lined interior is the exact same she crawled through months ago.

"The Demogorgon?" Dustin asks.

"Can't be," Mike whispers, clutching the receiver to his chest. He creeps backwards from the tree. "I hope not."

Suddenly, a pale, bone-thin arm shoots out from between the folds of the opening. The boys yelp in fright.

But then, a second arm appears, as skeletal as the first. The arms pry aside the loose membranes gating the portal, and finally, she emerges, with only a hospital gown clinging to her frail and gangly physique.

"Oh my God," Lucas says. "No way."

"I'll be damned," Hopper says.

El It's actually El, in the flesh-- or so she thinks. Her outward appearance curbs Nancy's astonishment as wisps of black mist evaporate from her skin, moving like ash tossed by the wind. Her eyes seethe a hazy orange color, as if they were smoldering coals. Her frail body belies a terrifying aura, but her glowing gaze is soft somehow, especially as she scans the company before her, coming to rest upon Mike. A shallow smile crosses her lips.

Mike gasps until a sob bursts from him. He rushes to her, but stops

short when she holds up her hand. Hurt, his expression twists in confusion.

“You should not touch me,” she says. “I’m sorry, Mike. But it’s good to see you. All of you.”

“El,” Mike sobs. “What’s happened to you?”

“Chief,” she says.

Hopper’s adam’s apple bobs. He remembers himself, snatching up the Eggo bag and crossing over to her. He offers them up. “Good to finally see you, kid.”

She takes them, smiling. “Always wanted to taste these again.”

“Listen, I need you to help me explain,” Hopper says.

“I know.” Her gaze falls to the forest floor.

“What is going on?” Mike insists. He takes a step closer to her, saying, “El, do you live in the Upside Down now?”

El returns her attention to him, pressing her lips together.

“Yeah,” Hopper says for her. At that, Mike takes the step back.

“I cannot remain on your side for long,” she says. Suddenly, she snaps to Nancy. Nancy reels at the intensity of her gaze, which floats down to her oozing palm. El says to her, “You got my message.”

“Message?” Nancy repeats. Then, it dawns. “The phone?”

El nods. She sweeps the area, her brow knitting. “But where is he?”

She blinks. “Jonathan?”

“And Miss Joyce?”

“Not here,” Nancy says flatly.

El sighs. “Then you must let them know.”

“Know what?”

“Will must stay with me.”

“What?” Mike says.

El says, “It is safer with me. I can control it.” She turns to the Chief. “But they lied.”

Nancy cannot believe her ears. “You’re saying he’s with you, in the Upside Down?”

El shakes her head.

“He was taken by those government goons,” Lucas says.

She says, “He was.” Again, to the Chief, “I can control it when it wakes up, but they are not letting him return. They don’t know how to survive on this side. It gets stronger everyday.”

“Why? Who is ‘they’?” Nancy asks, El’s explanation sounding as clear as mud to her. It’s at this moment she wishes Jonathan would have changed his mind and return, clued in by the Chief’s car parked along the side of the road. Otherwise, she will have to explain in just as murky terms.

“The bad people. And the monster.”

Silence blankets the scene as they absorb the word ‘monster’.

Mike winces as though the information were a physical assault. He asks the question forming in Nancy’s mind: “So, you’re working for them, too,” he states, glancing at the Chief.

“More like we’re all working for her, in a sense,” Hopper says. He kneels down before El, saying, “Those ‘bad people’ ordered me to hand over Will. But El here, she said it was the right thing. But something’s gone wrong, hasn’t it?”

“I need your help,” she urges. “We have to return them to the other side. *My* side. But they won’t listen anymore.”

"Damn it," Hopper hisses, rising. He runs a hand over his lips. "*Shit.*"

"Chief?" Nancy asks. "Can you please help me understand what El is talking about?"

Hopper closes his eyes, then says, "The plan was to have Will go back to the other side with El, along with whatever the hell it is he's been coughing up this whole time. Seal the holes, and peace returns." He frowns. "Except for the Byers."

"You're telling me that Will has to go back to that, that place? After all you went through," Nancy says.

"We were too late," Hopper admits. "I don't know why or how, but Will can't survive much longer on our side."

Nancy covers her mouth with her fingers. Her chest throbs; Will has been like this the whole time. No longer Will, but Upside Down Will. Dead, for all intents and purposes, except for his body being used as fodder for something else. A *monster*.

Like Barb, she thinks, tears seeping over her eyelids.

"I have to get Jonathan," Nancy declares. "We have to tell Joyce."

"Yeah," Hopper says.

"There's got to be a way we can help him. Help *you*," Mike pleads.

El only smiles at him. "I missed you," she says, her bottom lip quivering.

Mike sways on his feet, clenching and relaxing his fists. He drags a knuckle across his eyes. His face screws up. "I do, too. So much. I'm just glad you're alive, even if-," he hiccups. "Even if you're like this."

A flash of pain mars her smile. "I have to go now." She looks up at the Chief. "Come back tonight. I can get you inside," she says.

"What about us?" Lucas says, glancing between Dustin and Mike.. "We can come too, right?"

Hopper scoffs. “Not a chance. It’s best I took you kids home and you stay home. I’ll figure this out.” He looks over to Nancy and says, “And break the news to the Byers.”

“What? After all this, you’re not gonna let us back you up?” Dustin says.

Mike sighs, then says, “It’s not the Chief’s call. Is it, El?”

Her gaze falls.

“Aw, man,” Lucas says.

Nancy observes the exchange, her hope for a positive outcome diminishing by the second. It disappears when Hopper says solemnly, “I suspect this is a one-way sort of trip, anyway.”

Her throat tightens. The gravity of the statement washes over the boys like a wave, and they bow their heads as they absorb the implications.

“Let’s get you all home,” Hopper says. He turns to El. “Try not to eat all of those in one sitting. I’ll bring by more when I come back.”

El clutches the bag of Eggos to her, smiling. It fades when she says, “Goodbye, Mike.”

Mike lifts his head only just. “Goodbye, El.”

She hesitates, then turns away to squeeze back through the horrid portal. The section of trunk slides back into place, and the bark mends itself until no trace of the doorway remains.

“Come on,” Hopper says, stooping to scoop up the busted receiver. Blood continues to seep down his fingertips as he leads them back through the woods. The boys obey in silence. Nancy takes one last glance at the tree, her jaw clenched. As she turns away to catch up, and trains her gaze to Hopper’s retreating form. A sudden swell of indignation reinforces her resolve.

There’s *no way* she can sit at home. Doubly so for Jonathan, once he hears the truth. Suicide mission or not, she resolves to return tonight,

with him, and with her gun for good measure.

And maybe, she thinks, they could use one more. She has no idea how she might persuade *him*, but decides it to be worth a shot.

“Chief?” she calls out.

“Yeah?”

“Would you mind dropping me at school instead? I want to get my bike and a few things from my locker.”

“Sure.”

She notes the beaten trail and the stake marking the site. She sears the image into her memory.

As they near the car, she remembers her brother. Catching up to him, she places a hand on his shoulder. He trudges like a zombie over the dead leaves, and seems not to notice the contact. She tugs on him to stop.

“What?” he says, his voice devoid of any discernible emotion. It’s then she notices his wet cheeks.

“Oh, Mike,” she says, pulling him into a hug. He tenses, but does not resist her. “Things will work out, okay?”

“They haven’t yet,” he spits, tearing himself away.

Flustered, she fails to reply before he climbs into the back seat. She lets it go, and retakes her seat in the front. The Chief turns over the engine when she pulls the door shut. The silence and gentle motion of the car threaten to lull her to sleep, but a throbbing dread in the pit of her stomach keeps her eyes wide open.

Notes for the Chapter:

THANK YOU for feedback! I will keep saying this,
and saying this...

16. Chapter 16

Notes for the Chapter:

Woo hoo! Update!

A quick rap of his knuckles against the door, and Jonathan twists the handle to throw open the door. Chester lifts his head and woofs in greeting. He glances over to the television set to the news, with the weak signal cutting bars through the anchorwoman.

...crews are investigating an outbreak of leaks and water pressure drops all over Hawkins. Town officials say that it is a result of old, worn-out pipes, and they have requested the State of Indiana to approve funding for replacements. The Mayor does admit, quote, "that it is so much wishful thinking" and that he appreciates the patience of Hawkins' residents as they resort to patches and temporary fixes...

He figures his mother must have switched the television on for some white noise as she naps. She stirs, however, when he turns the dial and the screen clicks off. Chester barks again. Sitting up in the bed, she blinks away her drowsiness.

"Jonathan?" she says, sitting up on her elbows.

"I'm back, Mom," he says.

She blinks again, scanning him and the room. "Where's Nancy?"

Jonathan swallows, heavy. But before his pause becomes too lengthy, he says, "I took her home."

"Oh," she says, falling back. She puts a hand to her forehead as though fighting off a headache. "That's good of you. I'd hate to worry Karen."

His brother, and what he had witnessed is on the tip of his tongue. His mother suddenly swings her legs over the edge of the bed and rises.

"You know, I'm happy for you."

He questions her with a look.

“You don’t get devotion like that unless she’s serious.”

Jonathan shuts his eyes, his temples burning. “*Mom.*”

“Okay, okay. I just wanted to be sure you knew.”

He tries to smile. “Got it.”

Chester trots circles between them, making low *borfs* and wagging his tail. Joyce glances down, heaving a sigh. “Guess you are due for a walk.”

“I’ll take him,” Jonathan says. His mother holds up her hand.

“No, I could use the exercise to wake me up. You ought to go back to school. Keep yourself occupied at least,” she says, rising to grab her purse on the nightstand. She searches it and pulls out a pack of smokes.

“It’s not even an hour before last bell, Mom. No point today.”

She furrows her brow as she extracts a cigarette. “Is it that late already? God.”

“You needed the rest.”

She lights the smoke and sits back down onto the bed. He joins her. He swallows thickly once again, his pulse rising as the truth hammers away, demanding its release. But as he notices his mother’s slack shoulders and slow, steady sighs, he cannot help but realize that this is the most relaxed and comfortable he has seen her in days.

“Maybe it was the sleep, but I feel a lot better now that Hopper’s taking care of him,” Joyce says.

The statement stings him, but words remain stuck in the back of his throat.

“Something the matter?” Joyce says, taking a drag. She leans back to get a look at him. “You feeling sick?”

Hopper turned Will over to the feds. I saw it, Mom, with my very own eyes.

“Just tired,” he says.

“I bet you are. Still, maybe work will let you pick up a shift this evening? Could help you take your mind of this.”

Maybe, he thinks. Maybe he can still solve this without worrying her. His allies, however, are few. Except...

“Actually, I was thinking I might head over to Steve’s for a bit,” he says. “I want to return the lamp, anyway.”

Joyce nods, tendrils of smoke rising and curling between them. “I think that’s a great idea. Please thank him for me.”

He stands. “Think you’ll be okay? I can stick around if it would make you feel better. Or pick up something to eat.”

Joyce waves him off. “Nonsense. Chester and I can keep ourselves occupied. Won’t we?” she says to the dog. Chester sits and stares up at her, still vigorously wagging his tail.

Jonathan puts a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ll be alright,” she insists. “You should be with your friends.”

Jonathan plumbs his memory, grasping at vague recollections the correct turnoff on the lonely stretch of two-lane road. Several weeks ago, and for a mere two days, he did the Steve the favor of shuttling him to and from school when a belt snap put the latter’s car out of commission. That favor seems like forever ago, and Jonathan had little reason to visit the Harringtons since. Nonetheless, with the familiar terrain, he trusts that as he gets closer, landmarks will prompt and jog the rest of his memory.

The lapse also serves as a good of a reason as any to take his time. To stall, he admits. He glances over to his backpack in the front seat and

sighs. He expects Steve will be as friendly as an ogre at the sight of him. Whether he can convince him is more of a dice roll than a sure bet.

After all, Jonathan has some idea of his state of mind. Once, the roles were reversed. Once, he hated guys like Steve, and once, he suffered the bloody knuckles to prove it. Much of it due to one precious reason.

He runs a hand over his face. The fresh memory of her shock and disappointment wrenches at him. So, too, does the thought of facing his battles alone. Steve, whatever of his disposition, might be the last person he could depend on.

He glances up to his rearview mirror. A glint of headlights reflects back.

He snaps back to the mirror when he catches those same headlights gaining on his rear bumper. The grill is wide and boxy. A van. His pulse leaps, and he reflexively steps on the gas. The van continues to gain, hurdling toward him as though on a collision course with ferocious speed. He tightens his grip on the steering wheel, and he resists the urge to run himself off the road to escape it. To his relief, the van slows as it comes within but a few meters of his back bumper. He lifts his foot off the gas. The van fishtails, then swerves over the line and passes him. It rushes by, resuming its blistering pace, but not before he recognizes the beige background and blue lettering.

A reckless impulse seizes him, and he floors it. He speeds until he catches up within sight of the van's back bumper. Red lights flare as it brakes fast and sudden then peels off to the right and onto a cross street.

Jonathan glides around the corner to follow, maintaining distance. The van makes a left turn, entering a row of suburban homes. He comes close to losing sight of it when it makes another sharp right.

Just before the road widens into a cul de sac, in a rapid motion he pulls over and kills the engine. There, a second van and two crewmen hold position near the center of the circle, and just beyond an open

manhole cover. The arriving van parks, and its crew jump out. Unlike the first two crewmen, these individuals are covered from the neck down in off-white hazmat suits, with sealed galoshes at their feet. From the back of the van, they extract tongs, clear plastic boxes, and flashlights. The crew then pulls the hoods over their heads and zip up. They waste little time in descending through the maw of the open sewer with the other crewman helping to drop down their equipment.

Seconds lengthen into minutes. The first two crewman seat themselves on the van's bumper, mouths moving as they shoot the bull. They glance over to Jonathan. Then, one of them points. The other squints. Jonathan sinks into his seat, and hopes he remains below their notice, only just keeping his sight over the dash.

But it's too late. One of the crewman straightens and makes a direct path towards his car. A flurry of expletives fly through his mind before he runs through a litany of potential explanations for his presence. *He's waiting for a friend. His condition is acting up. He might throw up.*

"Excuse me!"

He winces, but realizes the muffled words did not come from the crewman. Instead, it's an older woman coming down her driveway. A concerned resident, he assumes, who proceeds to repeat herself and wave the crewman down. Distracted, the latter pauses his stride and aborts his approach to greet the woman.

A burst of relief exits his lungs. It's then that he spots an off-white hood emerge from the manhole. He throws over the rim one of the boxes. It appears empty, but Jonathan knows better.

This isn't about the rash of leaky pipes. This is *specimen collection*.

He jams the key back into the ignition and fires up the car. The crewman starts as Jonathan pulls around, but the resident keeps the crewman glued well enough for Jonathan to escape.

The spike of adrenaline floods out the fog in his mind. Once it subsides, he recalls exactly the route to Steve's house.

He rolls up to the curb, hoping to take a brief respite to settle his nerves. No such luck, as he sees Steve out in the driveway. He perches atop the trunk of one of two cars in the driveway, breath frosty and legs swinging. His legs stop when he spots him.

Jonathan parks, grabs his backpack by the arm strap, and gets out. "Hey," he calls.

Steve grimaces, rolling his eyes as though put upon. "Hey," he parrots.

Jonathan clears his throat, lugging the backpack along. Steve sways to and fro as though adrift, and in a way that concerns Jonathan. Once near enough, however, he sets the bag down, unzips it, and pulls out the hand lamp.

"Wanted to return this," he says.

Steve shrugs. "Cool," he says, making no move to take the lamp.

"Hey, you alright?"

Steve looks away.

Suddenly, a commotion pulls Jonathan's attention from Steve and toward his house. Voices. Angry, booming voices. Shadows dance behind the closed window curtains. He inwardly winces with instant recognition, and the stinging reminder of when his father used to be around.

Steve seems to have noticed his discomfort when a hollow smile crossing his lips. He nods his head back, "Your folks ever get like that?"

"All the time," Jonathan admits.

Steve nods, the smile vanishing. "Wish they'd just split like yours did and be done with it."

"I'm sorry, man," Jonathan says. "It really sucks."

"Yeah," Steve mutters. In an instant, his dour expression brightens to an exaggerated proportion with a sharp inhale. "So? How's Nancy?"

Jonathan sighs. "Listen, I didn't come here to start that bullshit with you."

Steve ignores him, continuing on to say, "Guess I can sleep knowing I got the taste of her first. I just hate that you had to be my sloppy seconds."

Jonathan clenches his fists. His jaw sets at Steve's impish smile. But it's then he notices the paper bag resting on the trunk beside Steve. The neck and mouth of a bottle stick out from the top, and the scent of alcohol suddenly becomes all-pervasive. Jonathan's indignation abates, but only just.

"For the record, she made her choice all on her own."

"Oh, I know."

"And I'm not getting into this while you're in the tank. I know better."

Steve pins him with an icy stare, then rolls his eyes. "So if it's not that, then why are you here? You could have given back that thing at school," he says, straightening his shoulders as he speaks, then dropping them.

Jonathan's sick of holding it, so he drops the lamp back into the bag. He focuses himself with a measured breath. "I need your help."

"You need-," Steve starts, exasperated. "It's pretty obvious I'm not really in the condition nor the mood."

"I wouldn't be putting this on you if I weren't out of options," He hesitates, adding, "Because we might not come back."

Steve knits his brow, the glassiness of his eyes fading as he sobers. "Hang on. Does this have to do with...those things?"

“More than that,” Jonathan admits. “Will, too. We’d be finding a way to get into the water treatment plant. The place is on government lockdown. Long story, but Will is in there. Who knows what kind of shit they’re doing to him. I want to bust him out.”

As Steve listens, he grows stern. He grabs the bottle and takes a deep swig. He wipes his lips with his sleeve. “What about Nancy? I mean, where is she?” A sufficient explanation escapes Jonathan, and he realizes he’s hesitated for too long when Steve then says, “*Oh*.”

“It’s-,”

“You guys had a fight.” Steve rolls his head back, grinning.

Jonathan shakes his head. “Misunderstanding,” he corrects, but he loathes the glint in Steve’s eye.

“*Damn*. Not even a day and you guys aren’t speaking. So is she in or not?”

“I’m not sure this time. Maybe it’s for the best. Listen, am I wasting my time here, or what?”

Steve sighs, his head tilting down. “I don’t know. Depends on what your plan is. I mean, walking up to a place like that sounds like a good way to get shot dead.”

Jonathan puts forth an audacious strategy brewing in his mind. “There should be utility crews all over town. I was thinking we’d find one and sneak onto one of their vans.”

“*Pffft*,” Steve blurts. “Are you serious?”

Steve’s abrupt dismissal sours his confidence. “What’s wrong with that idea?”

With an exaggerated shrug of his arms, Steve answers, “Sure, let’s just make it more convenient for them to dump our bodies. This isn’t the movies, you know. We’d get caught in seconds.”

His audacious plan collapses along with his tenuous optimism. “Way to look on the bright side. You have a better idea?”

Steve slumps and chews his lip. He shakes his head. "Water treatment plant, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Then you take the way everything else gets there." As he speaks, his eyes drift to a manhole cover in the street.

Jonathan curls up his face.

Steve says, "You'd do what it takes, right?"

"If it's the only way," Jonathan says. "You're right. Thanks." He picks the lamp back up, walks over, and deposits it in Steve's lap. He takes a step back, saying, "Guess this is goodbye, then."

"Now wait a minute." Steve throws the lamp aside and hops off the trunk of the car, wobbling as he lands. Once stable on his legs, he says, "I haven't said I wasn't coming with you."

Jonathan beams at him. "Really?"

"Yeah. You piss me off sometimes, but I'd be even more pissed if you went and got killed. 'Sides-," He glances back toward his house. "Spelunking around in a sewer still beats sticking around here."

"Thanks, man," Jonathan says, clapping him on the shoulder. He frowns when suddenly, Steve's face contorts in mild confusion. It's then that his ears pick up the clicking of a bicycle.

"Nancy?" Steve says.

A shock runs through Jonathan, and he spins around to see Nancy gliding along the curb. She turns into the driveway, hops off the seat of her bike, and pops its kickstand. "Jonathan?" she says, breathing hard and with sweat glistening on her forehead. "What are you doing here?"

"Um," He glances at Steve.

She shuts her eyes and sighs.

"Looks like he beat you to it," Steve observes.

"Well, guess it's better this way. Jonathan-," she starts, taking another heavy breath. Her gaze falls.

"What?" he presses.

"There's something you need to know," Nancy says. "After you left, the Chief took us to a spot in the woods."

Jonathan huffs, reluctant to listen.

"You made your feelings clear, but the Chief wasn't lying. She's really alive," Nancy says. "Sort of."

"Who is?" Steve asks.

"Eleven," Jonathan says.

Nancy adds, "The strange girl my brother found."

"She helped us find Will last time," Jonathan says.

"And Barb," Nancy says.

"And Barb," Jonathan repeats as though a prayer. "What do you mean, 'sort of'?"

Nancy says, "El's alive, but part of the Upside Down. I wish you had come with us. She was the one on the pay phone." Jonathan absorbs the information silently, his mind working to make sense of it. It's not enough for when she bowls him over.

She says, "She wanted to tell you that Will, too, is like her. Part of the Upside Down." She swallows, and says barely above a whisper, "His rescue came too late."

"Bullshit!" Jonathan spits.

"Hey!" Steve pipes up.

Nancy scowls at him after she catches a whiff of the booze in the air. "Have you been drinking?"

Steve admits, "Maybe. A little."

Nancy shakes her head. To Jonathan, "Look. I know it's hard, but think about it. Has Will been getting any better since last November? And we know he's probably been spitting up those things this whole time. That's not human. That's not of this world."

Silence drops around them like a curtain. Her harsh statements inflame him, but his rage burns out as swiftly as it rises. *Not of this world. Not human.* The words puncture through his defenses, and through his denial so cleanly that it wipes his mind of anything but a vile truth. He squeezes his eyes shut. "He's always been sick," he admits. His eyes sting, and brings a hand up to pinch his temples in a vain attempt to control himself. He can focus on little else on the memory of Will's sunken eyes, clammy skin, and weak smiles. "He's been so sick."

"Because he's wasting away. He's on the wrong side," Nancy says. "Like a fish out of water."

Jonathan feels pressure on his shoulder. He drops his hand from his eyes and looks over to see Steve wearing a pall of sympathy.

Nancy chances her hand out to grasp his. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't believe it," Jonathan says. "There's got to be a solution. It has to be reversible."

"That's actually not the biggest issue right now," Nancy says.

Jonathan regards her with little disguised umbrage. "What do you mean?"

"El said she would take care of Will. But something's gone wrong."

"What has?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but the Chief is going to try and stop it. I want to be there, too."

"Where?"

“At the portal. The Chief is returning at nightfall. We have to go now.”

Jonathan checks back over to Steve. The latter nods, affirming his support, but raises a finger to them saying, “Hang on.” He seems to sober rapidly as he makes a sure-footed retreat into the garage behind him. He first snatches up a Maglite resting on a shelf and checks the juice with flicks of the switch. Assured that it works, he then bends down to thread cautious fingers through the gap behind the shelf rack. Miscellaneous tools and equipment thump and clatter as his shoulder jostles them.

Jonathan starts, “What are you-,”

“A-ha!” Steve rises, carefully extracting a familiar nailed baseball bat, the same he used to battle the monster months ago. Jonathan can’t fight the grin that creeps up his face.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so thrilled that folks are finding this as gripping as the series, so the pressure is on to maintain the quality-- here's hoping I come through while we're barreling towards a conclusion here

17. Chapter 17

Notes for the Chapter:

I actually...I actually updated....I might even...finish...this...fic...? Think and pray for me

Cold. Her teeth chatter as the dank air pierces through her clothes and bleeds her warmth out into the sewer tunnel. Even with the aid of Steve's flashlight, she never realized just how *dark* a sewer tunnel could be.

Steve sweeps the torch to and fro, the meager light cutting an icy wedge through the darkness surrounding the earthen, concave walls, and glinting off of veins of black pipes. She does her best to ignore the stagnant reservoir bisecting their way forward, and the scuttling of vermin between cracks in the masonry.

Most unsettling of all are the specks of dust and debris swirling and hovering in suspension, and it's an all too real replica of the other side. Her stomach lurches, and not just from the pervasive stench. *What if we did not descend into a sewer at all, but into another portal? What if we crossed into the Upside Down without realizing it?*

She flinches when something grips her bicep, and her held breath rushes from her lips.

"You okay?"

Jonathan. He's here with his hand over her arm, and she remembers to breathe. She doesn't remember stopping as Steve turns around with flashlight in hand pointed to the ground. He taps the nailed bat in his other hand against his shoulder, asking the same question with the tilt of his brow.

"Stop looking at me like that. You sure this is the right direction?" she says through clenched teeth, gulping as she keeps as much of the foul air as she can from passing through her nose. It only just keeps her nausea in check. She pulls herself away from Jonathan.

“Hard to tell. I think this is headed south, at least,” Steve says, turning sideways and searching the space with the flashlight for a clue. “Didn’t really think this far ahead, okay? I’m still wrapping my brain around how I even ended up down here with you two.”

She turns to Jonathan, and doesn’t miss the bob of his throat, and his tightening grip on the strap of his backpack. “What are you thinking?” she asks him.

Jonathan looks at her, then to Steve. “Just a theory.” He holds out his hand. “Pass me the light.”

Steve shrugs and does as asked. Nancy strains to work out where Jonathan is going with this until he wedges the flashlight under his arm and brings the backpack forward, extracting the hand lamp.

“Oh, *no*,” Steve says, wiping a hand over his face as he shifts with barely-contained discomfort. “No way. You don’t think-”

“Let me.” Nancy reaches for the hand lamp’s handle. She tightens her grip as Jonathan unscrews and carefully extracts the red bulb. The bulb is much too large for the flashlight, so once he repacks the lamp, Jonathan holds it up and aims the light so it passes through it. It’s a laughably crude solution, but the light refracts and blushes just enough to where the effects are instantaneous.

Steve swallows hard, scanning the floors, the walls, the stone overhead. “*Shit*,” he breathes, voicing the most appropriate reaction to the space now littered with black, undulating slugs, as numerous as they had been in the Byers’ house.

“We follow them,” Jonathan whispers, as though one false move could see them swarmed and their blood sucked dry in seconds. It’s a possibility Nancy can’t rule out as she takes a silent and cautious step forward. Breathing is a conscious decision to make as her companions proceed with her.

“They aren’t moving,” Steve observes as they creep forward. “How are we supposed to follow them?”

Suddenly, there’s a sickening crunch like a snapping twig, the sound

as subtle as a thunderclap within the tightly enclosed space. Steve jumps with expletives under his breath as Nancy's heart leaps to the back of her throat. "I think I stepped on one," Steve whispers, searching the ground in frantic twists.

Nancy's breath hitches when something caustic floods her mouth. She covers her face with her sleeve as her nose and eyes start to burn.

"Moron," Jonathan growls, throwing an arm across his face and sweeping the light over the ground. He stops when it falls on the carnage near Steve's feet. His heel struck the head, or perhaps the tail of one such creature, splitting it open like a overstuffed sausage. "Shoe!"

They gasp when the rubber of Steve's heel bubbles and splits as contact with its blood eats away at the material. The sharp fumes do nothing to improve to the already swampish stench of their surroundings. Steve curses again, pushing off his sneaker with the bat. He stuffs the head of it, nails and all, under the tongue of it and dunks it into the reservoir.

"Acid blood," Nancy observes, stepping lightly past the squished slug.

"Because they weren't disgusting enough," Steve says, pulling up the bat and his dangling shoe from its rinse in the water.

To their horror, the carcass begins to twitch and writhe. Its muscles pulse under its torn skin, then its flesh splits entirely at the fatal injury. The slug bisects and, once in two pieces, the skin knits itself back together, creating two slugs where there was one. Steve opens his mouth to speak but Jonathan shushes them, his arm extended as he lifts his chin. Her eyes follow his up to the dark splotches of otherworldly life undulating above them. They twitch and spasm, as though rousing from hibernation.

Then, suddenly, they turn and bolt down the tunnel, sliding through the grooves in the masonry and pipes as they flee.

"That way!" Nancy calls out, her voice booming like the racing pulse in her ears. She spends little time basking in her relief as the creatures thread past their feet, ignoring them for the time being.

While Steve hops on one leg as he replaces his shoe, Jonathan breaks into a canter, removing the red bulb so he can light a clear path forward. She calls his name, but as the darkness swallows up him save for the pinpoint of light, she and Steve have little choice but to keep up the rapid pace, hoping to avoid crushing more slugs underfoot. They stop with him as he checks splits in the tunnels with the red light. Each time, the seemingly unending stream of slugs overlay their reality, marching like rats following a pied piper. The stench intensifies somehow, with acrid chemicals and saline mixing with the overall rot that is Hawkins' wastewater.

Nancy keeps the collar of her shirt raised over her nose as the musty brick of the tunnels transitions to musty iron plating. The jog warms her aching extremities, even as she forces every breath through the thin cloth.

For a split second, she forgets her discomfort when a weak gust of fresh air brushes past her cheekbones. She snaps to the origin of the draft, drawing the trio around a final corner, where the tunnel comes to an end, and metal grates replace the stone and dirt above them. The black creatures phase out of dimension under the pale orange glow of a service light hanging off the side wall, flickering as a lighthouse might over the night sea.

But the strangest detail of all is a deep red hue tinting the outside past the iron gate. It's enough that Jonathan can remove the red bulb and the shadowy flow about them remains visible.

"Shit," Jonathan mutters. The flashlight bounces off a screen of iron bars, with gobs of muck and litter caked on near the waterline.

"Your powers of observation never cease to astound me, Byers," Steve whispers.

"Shut up," Jonathan says, though he punctuates with a light-hearted huff.

While Nancy, however, stops to pull down the collar of her shirt and take in a lungful of the fresh air, the chill in her bones be damned. Beyond the bars lies an open air lagoon, with distant flood lights casting highlights and shadowy outlines over the pool and a row of

vertical metal screens on the opposite side. Though barely visible as they exit the tunnel, the slugs slip through the gaps in the iron bars with ease and leave telltale wakes in the otherwise still and murky water. Their numbers seem to have tapered off, an observation she tries not to dwell on for the moment.

Nancy glances up to the service light nearby. In the shadows, she can make out the rungs of a steel ladder sprouting from the wall and offering a way out of the deep trench. "Up there?" she whispers.

Jonathan points the flashlight to the ladder, and further up until the light bounces off at hatch at the top.

"Turn that off!" Steve hisses, his hand darting out to snatch the flashlight from Jonathan. He clicks it off, then points it up to the hatch. "And let's keep our voices down, okay? Minimal conversation from now on."

The flow of slugs reduces to a trickle, with one to two skittering by and wedging through the gate. Nancy glances about in a vain attempt to come up with a clever idea that might guarantee a lack of detection, but her gaze soon returns to the ladder. "Only way," she states like a death sentence.

Jonathan presses the flashlight to Steve's chest, jostling the latter as he transfers it, then moves to grasp the grimy rails. "I'll climb out first. You two stay here."

"No!" Nancy's arm shoots out to grasp him by his jacket, anchoring him in place before he can touch the ladder. She pulls him back with her grip like iron, refusing to let go even as he twists to look at her.

"There's no sense in all of us getting caught, or worse," he says.

She holds his gaze, unflinching even as he sighs and puts his hand over her balled up one, all too hot over her frozen one. Her grip on his jacket loosens only when Steve begins to swing the bat haphazardly, a low chuckle in his chest.

Steve tilts his head back and gestures to Nancy, all leftover mirth disappearing from his features. "Come on, Byers. You don't got to

impress her anymore. Besides, being the hero doesn't really suit you, man."

Jonathan shoots him a withering glance, and Nancy's arm falls from his jacket as her cheeks redden. She wants to lodge some other protest, but finds herself coming up short.

"Then what do you suggest?" Jonathan asks him.

"That you stay down here and keep Nancy safe while I scout the top."

"So that you can play hero instead?"

"Makes way more sense."

"No, it doesn't," Nancy interjects, finally finding her voice. "Both of you are idiots, you know?" The boys gape at her, incensing her further. Finally, she pushes past Jonathan and, before he can stop her, she begins the ascent.

"Nancy!" Jonathan calls to her. Wincing as he remembers his volume, he hisses, "What the hell?"

As much as she can shout while still having it be a whisper, she looks down and over her shoulder and says, "There's no other way! And I am not going to smell like shit well into the next century only to just give up! You both coming with me, or what?"

The two boys scramble, Jonathan going first, followed by Steve after the latter stuffs the flashlight into his belt. She hears the dull clangs of their footfalls as she reaches up to grasp the hatch door handle. She gives it a firm tug, loosening the latch. After one more tug, the rusty hinges grind loose, and the hatch cracks open.

"Be careful," Jonathan whispers. She feels his hand hovering near her heel as she peeks under the hatch, lifting it but a couple of inches.

Red. The grounds are bathed in it. The headworks stands adjacent to the lagoon and its filters, where all of its utility lights are wrapped in red.

"Nancy?" Jonathan asks from below. "How's it look?"

“Weird,” is all she says as a total understatement, noting that every utility light she can see casts a horrific stain about the place. A garage full of tanker trucks flanks them on one side, and to the other runs a narrow river, with the near bank bordered by a fence. Everything dotted with red lights.

She shakes off her disquiet as the lack of any other human presence comes to her as the most vital observation of all, so she quickly lifts the hatch the rest of the way and climbs out, silently beckoning the two boys to follow.

“Looks like they caught on to the same thing we did,” Steve says, taking in the scene. With gentle fingers, he and Jonathan silently close the hatch door. As they do so, a hiss, and a burst of blowing air erupts from just beyond the headworks. An odd glow mixes with the red tint over the grass.

“What was that?” Jonathan whispers.

“Quickly,” Nancy replies, keeping her profile low as she creeps across the lawn toward cover against the headworks. Save for the flash of light, the grounds remain strangely still and silent, save for the buzz and flicker of the building’s utility lighting. It’s a small mercy that the ruddy hue makes everything a bit harder to see, which she hopes benefits them as well.

The boys follow her lead as she keeps herself flush against the walls of the building. A wave of burning methane assaults them, and she fights against the urge to gag as she slide up to a plain door with a window cut out. She ducks low, rising only enough to peek past the harsh glare reflecting off of the glass.

“You see Will?” Jonathan whispers.

“Too dark to see.”

She tears away from the window when another hiss, and another burst of light startles her. This time, she feels a gust momentarily banish the chilly air. They shuffle past the door and stay close to the wall until they reach the corner of the headworks. She crouches, and the boys crowd in above her. Behind the building stretches an array

of shallow pools nestled among tangled nests of pipes and valves and surrounded by concrete platforms and catwalks. She hones in on several figures pacing the platforms with tanks on their backs, and who seem to be holding tongues of fire.

“Are those...?” Steve starts.

“Flamethrowers,” Jonathan finishes.

Her stomach drops when a black tail breaks the surface of one of the pools. *A tail? No, perhaps some sort of tentacle?* She struggles to identify it as it dives, then lashes out from one of the pools like a whip. The guards shout as they scramble, the nearest one shoots off a stream of fire across the surface of the water, the heat so intense that Nancy can feel the hairs of her brow crisp up. The tentacle thrashes and sends up a column of water before plunging back under to escape.

“We are so not prepared for this,” Steve says, his jaw hanging open.

“What are they doing?” Nancy asks aloud.

She reels back against the wall when, just around the corner, a door bursts open. A handful of feds - each also equipped with flamethrowers - pour out from the headworks and march down a shallow hill towards the pools. At the head of the gang goes the same blonde agent who took Will from Hopper.

Nancy winces when her scar tingles. Goosebumps prickle when she slips her hand under Jonathan’s, finding it slick with cold sweat. She squeezes him when, amongst the herd of black suits, Will appears with them. He’s not bound nor gagged, and seems to be following them willingly if listlessly towards the concrete platforms. Nancy glances up, seeing Steve holding Jonathan back by his shoulder with a firm hand. Her heart lurches when her eyes fall upon Jonathan’s face, screwed up in rage and anguish.

“Let me go,” Jonathan says through clenched teeth.

“Wouldn’t be doing your brother any favors if you Ramboed it right now. Be lucky if they didn’t roast you beyond recognition,” Steve

says, his quiet voice laden with sympathy.

Jonathan shrugs him off, pulling forward his backpack. Taking care with the zipper, he noiselessly extracts his camera.

“For the love of God, mind the flash,” Steve says.

“No shit,” Jonathan answers, fiddling with the switches. Nancy’s pulse still lurches when he aims and the shutter clicks and the reel whirs. A column of water erupts, and another tentacle breaks the surface of the pool, snapping to and fro. *Click, click*. Flames arc across the pool. *Click, click, click*.

The agents lead Will across the concrete platforms, and up along a catwalk. The blonde agent gestures to Will, then to the open water below. The tentacles thrash; the streams of fire are constant as the creatures beneath the surface seem to agitate when Will falls to his knees, his back curling as he succumbs to a fit of heaving.

Nancy gasps when suddenly, amid the chaotic frothing of water and black skin, a worm darts out, catching a goon off-guard. He thumps hard against the concrete as his legs are ripped out from under him, and his scream dies out in the second it takes for the creature to yank and drag him beneath the surface. The blonde agent yells something, but terror shakes the remaining guards, who aim their fiery nozzles carefully at the churning water.

Then, all at once, the surface breaks in a stunning crash. Rising like bloody spectres, five worms rise, towering to the height of street lamps, but at least thrice as thick. They let loose ghastly squeals through puckered mouths, like the jaws of a leech. They bellow as though heralding the charge when a horde of smaller slugs swarm out and over the platforms like so many black ants. Fire belches wildly, but the attacks only seem to enrage their gigantic brethren as they crash down upon the guards. Human screams replace the worms’ cries as bloodthirsty fangs sink in and tear their victims off of their feet. Pipes, railings, and concrete buckle as the monsters whip and thrash against their confines. As the guards are cast off, dead and drained of blood, they land on the platforms with a sickening crunch, the nozzles of their flamethrowers still flickering.

“Will!”

In an abandonment of all sanity and sense, Jonathan breaks into a sprint, tossing bag and camera aside as he rushes for the pools. Nancy’s throat burns when she calls his name at the top of her lungs, but it’s she then notices the reason for his sudden outburst: the blonde agent has her arms wrapped around a sickly Will, pressing the barrel of a gun to his head.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope to have this fic FINALLY wrapped up here in the coming weeks. I'm sorry for any and all frustration in waiting for me to update!